

Late, as usual, Express No. 7 from Bucharest, Budapest, and Bratislava was just pulling into Platform One at Brno Main Station. It was Wednesday, April 1, and there was the usual confused rush of travelers who lacked reservations but were trying, as a matter of principle, to board the middle cars of the train, even though these cars were intended (likewise as a matter of principle) for those who had reservations. In the midst of this rush Jacek Jost (33/5'9", oval face, brown eyes and hair, no special markings) took in the always unexpected sequence of numbers on the middle cars until, sufficiently amused, he finally caught sight of his own car, No. 52, hooked up between Nos. 34 and 38.

In compartment E two unpleasant surprises: First, Jacek's seat, No. 63, the second from the window, was just being occupied. Second, and even more unpleasant, its occupant was that loathsome Trost, like himself from Usti, in fact from the apartment house opposite his own. In the window seats, Nos. 61 and 62, two women stopped talking, as if scandalized by the two newcomers actually venturing to sit down in an otherwise empty compartment, right next to them.

"I've got No. 63," Jacek Jost declared, his ticket in his hand as evidence to the women and a challenge to Trost. "I'd like to sleep and I don't want to be awakened by somebody trying to claim my seat."

“So just sit across from me on No. 64,” said Trost. “It’s mine. No one’ll disturb you.”

Jacek shrugged his shoulders, carefully placed his large black satchel with brass fittings into the baggage net above seat No. 64, hung up his raincoat, and the train pulled quietly out.

“Twenty-two minutes late,” said Jacek.

“We’ll have to look lively in Prague to catch the 4:45 to Berlin,” said Trost.

“I’ve never missed it yet.”

“You make the trip often, don’t you?”

“Quite often. And you?”

“Not so much. The weather’s nice, isn’t it?”

“It is now.”

The women by the window began to talk again, they leaned so close together they hid the view, the compartment was overheated as always, and already Trost had taken shelter behind his dangling coat. Jacek spread his own out in front of himself, and in the darkness behind it he closed his eyes.

It was getting harder and harder to reach an agreement with the higher-ups in Brno, three days of exhausting negotiations and we still won’t get any ethyl acetate this year either—better not to think about next year—where have the days gone when you could save something from your travel budget, Lenka will be pleased with the Dutch cocoa, we can sprinkle it on our hot cereal, milk dishes sit best in a stomach queasy from six hours on a train, that’s what Lenka says, they’re the cheapest too and quickest to make, if I don’t miss

the 4:45 to Berlin we'll find Lenicka still awake and the water pistol will amuse her, but for how long?—ten minutes, no more, the blow-up squirrel would have been better, of course she'll spray the water pistol all over the place, when she gets fed up with it we'll build a play house out of mattresses and then an obstacle course, but that might be too much jumping around and then she won't feel like going to sleep and she'll keep calling from her crib, our sweet little beastie, Daddy come and tell the story again about the enchanted prince, you know, the one who had to ride the train through eleven black tunnels until the golden aurochs taught him which one the princess had been walled up in—it's aurochs, my sweetie, you're saying auwochs, yes, it's a great big hairy cow, this big.

“...and when Joe told her about the bidet, she bought him a bathroom brush.”

“What?!”

“A pink one, made of nylon—” the women next to the window were making each other laugh and to Jacek's distaste his neighbor pushed her hip farther and farther across the border between seats Nos. 62 and 64, into Jacek's territory. From the expropriated No. 63 across from him, Trost's pig-like snoring had already begun.

First class was still authorized for trips over 150 miles, the seats had armrests, and you could still save something out of your travel budget, but what would it be like five years from now or ten? Lenka probably had some Dutch cocoa left from last time, Lenicka would probably have gotten tired of the squirrel as well, if only the girl were older, no, if only she

could be a two-year-old again, how she's growing, soon she'll be coming home just to eat and sleep as if to a hotel, what would it be like ten years from now or twenty?—only on a train, it seemed, could a man get at Gauguin's WHERE DO WE COME FROM—WHO ARE WE—WHERE ARE WE GOING, once Lenka and I used to go through it almost every evening, but surprisingly the answer kept getting harder to come by—better not to think about some things—but Lenka's a good wife and we do have a darling, clever little girl, we both earn good salaries and we've got a first-category apartment, the first year each of us in different dorms, the second year each of us in different rooms, the third year at last a little attic room together, but Lenicka had already come by then, entire nights by her bed, carrying water from the cellar and heating it on our hotplate in the sink, if only it could be settled all at once, the fourth year a comfortable co-op at last, but another down payment to make, a loan to negotiate, furniture, rugs, a refrigerator, a television set, enough cares, if only it could be settled all at once, the best five years of your life suddenly gone, not very happy years at that, but now it was all settled and fulfilled, even that final wish, THE SEA—

—crowded on his right by his intrusive neighbor, baked from below by the uncontrollable heating system, tossed rhythmically and knocked on the head by the stiff imitation leather of the headrest, struck on his left by the draft from the door and tickled on his face by his hanging coat, to the snoring of Trost, the slob, and the prattle of those women by

the window, in the tension of the ever narrowing time span linking the delay of the Bucharest express to the departure of the 4:45 to Berlin—

—alone with the sun in a blue, blue hemisphere, outside time, naked, free, only desire, will, body, sex—all that makes a man a man—blissful, Jacek was swimming toward Africa.

Half an hour must have passed already, hurriedly he turned, quickly back toward the shark net, he tore his trunks free of the wire (Lenka had knitted them from an old sweater), swiftly back toward the rocky coast of Istria with its dozens of tiny terraced beaches separated by rocks, up to ours, the highest above the sea (and farthest from it), swiftly into his red beach chair alongside Lenka's red one: "You're always going off someplace," Lenka says, and Lenicka wants him to play bunny-rabbit.

From the highest section of the tiered beaches of our hotel, the Residence, beach is visible to the south as far as the narrow channel on the horizon—a day's sail off in that direction is the coast of Africa. Right behind Lenicka's little white knees, one level down, lies Mrs. Vanda (she kisses in the elevator), she keeps drawing into her mouth and then letting slide from her lips a huge, dark red, swollen oval grape. On the tiny concrete square by the Pension Jeannette the freckled artist presses his chin to his knees (he had offered to paint Jacek in the nude). On the rocks at the Belvedere handsome Yugoslav boys open black mussels with a knife, swallowing the contents and rubbing the remnants on their chests and thighs. On the tiny beach of the Hotel Palma that

magnificent black-haired Frenchwoman (before breakfast she too went swimming without a suit), with her palm she slowly wipes her moist, shiny hip. High up on a cliff, gazing toward the horizon, sits the bearded Swedish pastor (he keeps trying, in his absolutely incomprehensible language, to attract Jacek's attention to something or the other). Lenicka's gone to sleep in our arms. "Where are you rushing off to again?" Lenka asks.

Jacek swam southward toward the freckled painter at the Jeannette and got a piece of chocolate from him, but what were Lenka and Lenicka up to—in order to see, Jacek made his way through the bushes up to the rail of the promenade—everything's fine, Lenicka's asleep and Lenka's talking to the Mareceks, Jacek swam off toward the beach of the Hotel Palma, the dark Frenchwoman spoke fluent German with a husky laugh, suddenly he noticed her watch, he jumped up and ran out to the rail of the promenade—everything's fine, Lenka's talking to the Janeceks and Lenicka's still asleep, and Jacek swam along the beach of the Stefanie (where they make those fried sardines) and the Kvarner (where the redhead is lying) toward the cliff with the bearded Swede, his childish, trusting blue eyes and the warmth of his unknown language, suddenly Jacek stopped short, and now he was leaping over the rocks and up to the rail of the promenade—everything's fine, Lenicka's splashing with some kids and Lenka's talking to the Mareceks again, and greedily Jacek swam along the beaches of the Naiad, the Speranza, and the Miramar, toward the south, suddenly, in

order to see, he struck out toward the east—the red trapezoid of his empty beach chair between Lenka and Lenicka was like an insistent outcry, and nervously Jacek turned and swam quickly back, through the warm green waves that washed the welcoming stairs of the Miramar, the Speranza, the Naiad, the Kvarner, the Stefanie, the Palma, the Jeannette, and the Belvedere, to the stairs of our Residence and straight back to his place, with Lenicka's head propped against his shoulder and Lenka's fingers clasping his wrist.

Mrs. Vanda had struck up a conversation with the bald butcher from Chomutov, and before long her leg was lying across his fat hip. The freckled artist swam over to the rocks of the Belvedere and handed out chocolate, and soon he was posing a skinny boy. The waiter from Lovosice lay down near the dark Frenchwoman and soon they were kissing under her beach umbrella. The Swede on his cliff was saying something to two children and pointing to something on the horizon.

But on the stones at the Kvarner the redhead is still alone, she's lying on her stomach again and untying the back of her top, floating onto the warm green waves are rafts with girls stretched out on them as if for love-making, on the bottom of a metal boat a half-naked sun-browned blonde, and calling out along the shore toward the south a strip of radiant sea stretching all the way to Africa.

"Time to go," says Lenka, never with anyone else but her, she has a touch of sunstroke, Lenicka throws up on a rock, she must have a fever, it's all from the sun, my darlings, tomorrow we'll spend a nice long day at home and pull down

the blinds, with a smile Lenka clasps one handle of our enormous bag full of towels, bits of uneaten food, rags, baby oil, talcum powder, and a thermos, she takes both handles in one hand and the exhausted Lenicka by the other, “Time to go—” the strip calls to the south, never with anyone else but Lenka, an open road of green waves all the way to Africa, at an unheard command the higher-ups take their positions on the cliffs by their mine throwers, Lenka sprinkles Dutch cocoa on the sidewalk in front of the apartment house, this week we’re on clean-up duty, and from bed, with a shriek, Lenicka fires a pistol full of burning ethyl acetate, the blow-up squirrel would definitely have been better, pull off Lenka’s constraining shorts and in a frantic crawl swim from the stairs of the Residence, warm green waves to the stairs of the Belvedere, the Jeannette, the Palma, the Stefanie, the Kvarner, the Naiad, the Speranza, and the Miramar, to Africa—

Thrown violently out of his seat, Jacek Jost flew across the space between the odd and even numbers and fell full force between Trost and his neighbor by the window, with a screech Trost pushed him roughly away with his shoulders and his knee, with his arms thrown out in desperation Jacek grabbed the shoulders and breasts of woman No. 61, fell kneeling to the floor, his face in her lap, and then, when he set his right cheek on her thigh and looked up, he saw the girl smile and saw his pale hands on her black sweater. The train had come to a stop.

No. 61 might be a bit over twenty, blonde and good-looking. Jacek’s neighbor, No. 62, some ten years older,

grinned and rubbed her stomach, which had struck against the small folding table under the window. It might have been the emergency brake—we lost something or ran over someone. The express soon started up again, on the main east-west line a train passes every four minutes, so each delay must be held to a minimum. Irritably, Trost hid behind his coat and Jacek spread his own out in front of himself, the theater last night had cut the irreducible minimum of eight hours of sleep to a mere six, they still hadn't reached Ceska Trebova and we always sleep as far as Pardubice.

No. 61 happened to be pretty, a pleasant sight, how charmingly she had protested that he didn't need to apologize, Trost had bleated something or other and crawled behind his coat, she was in such good shape, Lenka should start exercising again.

“...and then I wouldn't take it from him anymore.”

“But Nada, really...” the voices of the women next to the window.

No. 61 is called Nada, Nadenka, Nadezda, she's really very pretty, we hadn't even noticed whether she was wearing a ring or not—of course she is. We've still got half a tin of Dutch cocoa at home and a whole one, too, we bought it when the general director came on board, what things he said then and what he's doing now.

“I haven't met a man like that so far,” said Nada.

“How about Jirka?” said No. 62.

“He was very kind, pleasant, and an absolute zero.”

“You used to talk differently about him.”

To put that water pistol into Lenicka's hand would mean an immediate call to workmen to repaint the apartment, that's what happens when you buy gifts on the way to the station, what year was it when we interrupted a trip so that Lenka could have an umbrella from Ceska Trebova, a local specialty, then she left it behind somewhere.

"I wanted to believe it ... I would again, too, but about someone very different..." Nada was saying.

"Do I know him?" whispered No. 62.

"I don't yet myself. I may run an ad for him: 'Slim 23-year-old blonde with her own apartment looking for a man. Key word: MAN!'"

"Speak softer, or those two..."

"They're snoring again. Do you think I'd catch anybody that way?"

"Sure, mostly with that bit about 'her own apartment'—"

"I'd take him home for the night, for a test run in bed!"

"Don't shout so, Nada..."

"Seriously, if I liked him... But if he didn't like me, then I wouldn't chase after him. You know, the way you did that time with Milan Renc."

"Yeah, that was almost it..."

"It was wonderful, wasn't it—" Nada said loudly. No. 62 just giggled.

Lenka is on her way home from work now, she hasn't forgotten the milk for his hot cereal or to stop by the school for Lenicka, this week we have clean-up duty in front of the

apartment house, it's a lot for her, Lenka is a good wife, and if he's going to make up those two lost hours—eight hours a day keeps neurosis away—he has to go to sleep at once, counting off the order of the hotels on the Adriatic: the Residence, the Belvedere, the Jeannette, the Palma, the Stefanie, the Kvarner, the Naiad, the Speranza, Speranza in Italian is the same as Nadezda in Russian: *hope*—

“It *was* wonderful, wasn't it—” Nada said loudly, she almost shouted it, she's beautiful, with a smile she had bent over the face in her lap and had tolerated the touch of his pale hands on her black sweater, she almost called it out as a challenge, yet he stayed behind his coat, he ought to ask her where she was going...

“I stay behind this coat,” Trost's beery voice suddenly thundered forth, “and I don't even know where we're at. Was that Ceska Trebova? Good God! We're really making time, aren't we? And where are you ladies going?” He was trying to make an ordinary and quite vulgar pickup.

Jacek was suffocating behind his wrinkled old raincoat, why didn't we take the new iridescent, it was just like that pot-bellied Trost, the idiot, the way he sticks his muzzle out of the window every day, with our windows right opposite, 100% visibility, as soon as he gets home he strips to his shorts and sniffs in the pantry and the oven (the two apartments are identical in their lay-out and appliances), gobbles down roast pork right out of the pan and washes it down with a slug of beer straight from the bottle, then he brings a pillow to the windowsill and starts to gape from

window to window until TV comes on for the evening, then he gapes at that, pisses and snores, and that's the entire zoological profile of Mr. Trost.

"You don't say, really? Then we're practically from the same town!" Trost was master of the whole compartment, he wooed and pursued the poor women by the window, Nada of course soon stopped answering, but No. 62—"why don't you call me Vlasta"—had taken the bait and was giggling more and more, Trost wooed and pursued her, and Vlasta, already taking up half of Jacek's No. 64, twisted her backside, Jacek, rubbed and shoved by her hip, was rhythmically gyrated, slapped on the back of his head by the headrest, rubbed and burned by the imitation leather underneath him, annoyed to the point of pain, and then tenacious efforts to fall asleep, to sleep, back to the warm green waves and the stairs of the Belvedere, the Jeannette, the Palma, the dark Frenchwoman stroking her moist hip under the parasol, the Stefanie, the redhead is descending the stairs of the Kvarner and raising her hands to the shoulder straps of her bathing suit, at the Naiad the girls are rocking, stretched out on their rafts as if for love-making, and floating out from the Speranza is the sun-browned blonde spread out in the bottom of a glass-bottomed boat, Speranza is Italian for hope and the Miramar is just a dream, Mrs. Vanda kisses the huge swollen red grape, and on the rocks the handsome Yugoslav boys with their smeared chests and thighs, a seaside amphitheater of clamoring naked spectators, and the rhythmic beat of the waves insistently pressing against the rocky cliffs.

Jacek Jost pushed his raincoat aside and stood up, stared at Nada's inquisitive face, and went out of the compartment into the corridor, where, badly shaken, he staggered and clutched at doors and walls, locked himself in the little room at the end of the car, and looked at himself in a quivering mirror.

Lenka is on her way to school now to pick up Lenicka, in her bag a bottle of milk and on her palm calluses from that eternal bag, even on Sundays she doesn't get enough sleep, she never leaves anything undone, a wife a hundred times better than we deserve, so loving, never with anyone else but you, and she's a perfect mother to our clever, pretty little girl, Sunday mornings we take her into bed with us and after lunch we go to the zoo. It's true, in our civilized age the life of a father doesn't offer many experiences that are particularly exciting, in fact it doesn't offer any, however, instead of that—but five years of married life without the least shadow of infidelity aren't worth spoiling now for the sake of that.

Jacek Jost washed his hands and face with cold water and went back along the vibrating corridor to compartment E, he stopped short in the door—Trost was lounging on his seat, No. 64, alongside Vlasta on No. 62, he had even dared to take his coat with him and to hang Jacek's opposite, above No. 63, "Excuse me," he blared with his hand already resting on the shoulder of his new neighbor, Vlasta, "but in Brno you said that you wanted to sit there, and anyway that's the seat you've got a reservation for!"

“We worked it out this way,” Vlasta giggled.

“Of course, only if you don’t mind...” Nada added sweetly from the window, Jacek shrugged his shoulders and settled down very close to her on the green imitation leather seat. To be thrown out of your seat three times is obviously good luck on purpose, all the more when all flights have the same direction—when catapulted, there’s nothing to do but fly.

The train sped smoothly over the remaining hundred kilometers, no one else would come in now. Opposite the mutual and constantly growing admiration of Trost and his already “darling” Vlasta, Jacek and Nada sat together on the settee designated for them, Nos. 61/63, and in the rocking rhythm of the warm green waves of the imitation leather seats they swam out toward the sun. The eleventh and final tunnel came just before Prague. Even before, Trost was panting heavily on darling Vlasta’s neck, the golden aurochs had already fulfilled its fairy-tale destiny, and in the glowing eleventh tunnel the happy prince, no longer bewitched, kissed his laughing princess, now at last released from her wall.

When they got out at Prague the other two disappeared, and Jacek and Nada easily caught the 4:45 to Berlin.

“All my life I’ve never gone any farther on this train...” Jacek whispered as it pulled into the station at Usti, and Nada grinned. Fine nylon lines twitched painfully on his wrists and ankles and around his body, the sensation of tugging straps with felt lining, like a horse’s harness, and the train pulled silently out along the shore and down the

springtime river, but then Decin is only twenty minutes from Usti and the next stop on the express.