

SONYA'S HOTEL YEARS

The airy bluish folds of the second-floor lace curtains of Villa Cynthia, built in the era of Art Nouveau and since then modernized several times, each time more expensively (the last time, last year, for an even hundred thou), came together with a firm tug of the cord and formed a continuous veil, a signal for the two below to conceal themselves in their designated places and remain there on guard and motionless, no matter what might happen in front of the villa's grilled entranceway.

Zahn nodded his head zealously as a signal to the window above that he'd got the point. His wife, Zahnova, set down her black suitcase, lined on the sides and corners in light-colored leather, right next to the inward-facing side of the stone lantern by the door, all precisely according to the scenario and so that the entire scene could be viewed more easily and completely. Both nodded their heads once more to the one above them, obediently and joyfully (they both detested Aja), and disappeared into the entranceway, which they double locked, leaving the key in the lock so that it would be impossible to dislodge it using a similar key from the outside.

Engineer Zikmund Holy (49), tall and slender, clad in (first-class) tailor-made trousers of fine-combed, light-beige wool, and an exclusive chocolate-colored shirt made of natural silk, with a sulfur-yellow tie magnificently displayed on a barely discernible tummy, withdrew from the window and walked noiselessly over the purple Turkish rug to the ebony glassed sideboard; with the skillful, silent movements of a single hand he unlocked and let down the massive

door: on the counter thus formed he placed a simply etched glass taken from the upper section of the mirrored shelves and drew out and uncorked (always with a single hand) a bottle of Tarragona spiced wine, in one motion he poured his noontime dose into the glass (precisely the same—a finger's breadth below the top of the glass—as any other day) and with alpaca-lined tongs (always with a single hand) he lowered a cirlet of lemon onto the surface of the wine. Aja will be surprised. But if she looks hard, will she be able to see anything from there? She won't look, of course, but let's hope we can hear her angry cries (and later, perhaps, her begging) through the casements of the side window, opened for just this purpose.

Unfaithful wives have been stoned, buried alive, immured, or at least whipped half-naked at the pillory — the unfaithful wife Aja Hola would in a very few minutes find a locked house and a suitcase full of her things standing next to the lantern to the left of the door. She won't take a good hard look, she'll curse. Vulgarly. At most she'll beg a bit . . . and we'll have a good view of that from here, through the lace curtains. Of course, the curtains could be opened, making the view somewhat more colorful, with sharper contours. Two, three, no more than five minutes of ecstasy. Zikmund took a sip of his drink.

What will follow? A small tug-of-war over the divorce, but not too much. He'll cope easily, as he has done twice before. If Aja's cheeky, I'll put the screws on. If she dares come here again, the Zahns will work her over in the garage. As they did that time with Marie. And then he'll be free. Chess, the mountains, and detective stories with iced champagne. And no more marriages again, ever. At most

some sort of pick-me-up . . . something young, foolish, and obedient. Aja's room will be vacant. How many beautiful young girls will thank him for it . . . and oblige. Followed by ten hours a day of sleep, and playing with the cat.

Down the street, on the other side of the low metal fence with sharp points on top and stone pillars (the whole thing rebuilt for 8,600 crowns), came Aja Hola in a red dress with wildly huge white dots, white sandals (340 crowns), a white shopping bag (420 crowns) over her shoulder, tan and on the whole very pretty for her twenty-eight years, with a head of hair (her permanents cost 50 crowns a piece, but then who really knows how much, and hardly as often as she claims, as she has claimed until today), effectively disheveled from artfulness, recently experienced bliss, neglect, or to be provocative perhaps? I have prepared a little surprise for you, my love, and Zikmund took another sip, again a very small one. What mattered to him most was that today his noontime dose of Tarragona should last him until the soup arrived, as any other day.

Aja comes through the gate and walks along the main drive. He looks at his wristwatch (2,350 crowns) just at the moment when she ought to catch sight of her suitcase beneath the lantern. She tries the door. Again. She fishes for the key in her handbag. But somehow the key doesn't fit, of course. She's a bit confused now. Zikmund takes another sip.

"Mr. Zahn!" Through the open casement of the side window Aja's rapid breathing can be heard perfectly. In the entryway, Mr. Zahn hears, but doesn't listen.

“Mrs. Zahnova!” In the kitchen, Mrs. Zahnova rejoices silently.

Those two are marvelous. Their fifteen years at the Cynthia have been excellent training for them. They're perfect.

Aja steps back from the door and stumbles over her suitcase. “Ziki!”

Her eyes don't actually goggle, but her anger plays according to the script. Zikmund draws back the curtains so that she can see him easily from below. Behind the closed window he takes a sip. Let's wait now until she starts to beg.

“Ziki, are you playing some sort of crazy joke?”

Aja's face is turned upward. This is how I wanted it, dear. Behind the window Zikmund raises his glass as in a toast, but he doesn't drink, he only grins.

“Ziki, at least open the window. I'll explain everything — Ziki!”

Aja's lovely, tanned face is turned upward. It shines only on the temples, as it does after love-making. . . go down, let her in, tell lies again for a while, avail yourself once more of her tanned face with the moist temples on the white damask cushion—

“Ziki. You can't do this to me. . .”

I can do what I like. The momentary weakness passes, Zikmund looks at his watch and then again out the window. Aja opens the suitcase and then slams it shut again. Will she beg? Or will she carry on?

“Don't imagine that. . . I've got my papers and all my things in there . . . Ziki! This can't happen so suddenly. I'm going to the police!”

Her papers and documents are all bound in red in a pocket of the suitcase, and the police will find a house locked and silent. So now get the begging part over with and then clear out. In eleven minutes it'll be time to have my lunch.

“Ziki. Ziki. Please. . .”

Aja's lovely pleading face with its moist temples . . . now it's perfect. Zikmund closes his eyes with pleasure and permits himself—Aja had long since ceased to interest him—a glance at the golden ring and silver flesh of the circlet of lemon swimming in the warm brown wine.

Noiselessly he drew back from the window and refrained from facing it even when its glass broke behind his back, noiselessly he left the room as the stone quietly rolled across the purple rug and came to rest between the white lions and the stylized grapes. Zikmund left the room, cautiously stepping over the stone thrown by Aja's hand. He left the room with the unfinished drink, and by closing the door he filtered out the sound of Aja's curses (particularly coarse), on the staircase he found absolute quiet and slowly he descended the stairs to the entrance hall.

“She's gone now,” said Zahn, and he would have laughed if that had been respectful.

“This evening change the locks on the front door and the gate.”

“Preparations have already been made, sir.”

“From now on, everything has to be locked. How about the ignition?”

“But you've already taken the keys. We could change it, but it wouldn't look pretty. I'd rather arrange a hidden

switch for the electrical system; that would be useful, for instance, when we park in Prague overnight.”

“Good. You're both off till Monday.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Berta can serve lunch now.”

Sitting alone at the long table in the ground-floor dining room, paneled in Finnish larch, Zikmund stirred his bouillon and egg and just before taking the first spoonful finished his noontime Tarragona.

Following lunch (veal cutlet *nature* with herb butter, cherry compote, grated roquefort cheese) and an hour's siesta (absolutely dreamless, save that just before waking he saw the tantalizing image of an unknown girl kneeling in a long children's nightshirt, a view from behind, but only a few seconds or so), a hot-and-cold shower, a good rub with a towel, in the entryway Zikmund took a packed weekend suitcase from Berta Zahnova, in front of the garage he got into his car (a low-to-the-ground, blue-black British Triumph), already started up by Wolf Zahn, its engine warm, gas tank full to the brim, oil full to the top line, and the battery charged, on the street he shifted into second gear and right away into third as he drove through Klise, Usti's ritzy section, and then the Vseborice prefab housing on his way to the concrete highway to the north, he shifted into fourth gear, switched on the radio, below Decin Castle he crossed the bridge over the Elbe, and after a further, pleasant fifty-minute drive up mountain roads to the resort town of Hrusov, at the foot of steep ridges, in the vicinity of Cottex Plant No. 08, along the main—and only—street on which, right behind the drugstore, there is an open field alongside a real log cabin, in the center of the round square

a red gas pump and grass sprouting up out of the pavement, on the less frequented spots (especially the square) Swedish clover blooms purple, but everything is clean and the sharp air has the perfume of water.

OUR FIRST FLORICULTURAL EVENING proclaimed a handmade placard at the gate of the Hotel Hubertus, and Ziki drove into the hotel courtyard, the manager, Volrab, hastened to open the car door (he never failed to do this), his wife Volrabka wiped her hands on her apron and already she was rushing to carry his suitcase up to room No. 2, which is reserved in our name for the entire year.

Not a single customer in the bar, Zikmund took a seat at his table by the window. From the kitchen doorway the waitress, Sonya, smiled at him.

“The usual!” Zikmund shouted across the room, and in a businesslike manner he scrutinized Sonya, who leaned over the refrigerator, stood on her tiptoes to reach some glasses on the top shelf, carefully poured out the dry vermouth, and ran to the kitchen for a circlet of lemon.

Hair thick, long, passionately red, skin taut, fine, gleaming, shining green eyes, not even nineteen yet, beautifully developed, an erect carriage, breasts placed far apart, delicate shoulders and a delicate waist, a flat stomach underneath the tightly laced apron, long thighs and long legs . . . first-class stock, daughter of a brilliant surgeon and self-taught aesthete who, after a successful Prague practice, had built a villa here big as a castle and who, like a village squire, raised his daughter not for work but for marriage. But he died prematurely, his villa was turned into a dental clinic and the orphaned Sonya taken on as a housemaid,

one who was now to be grateful to the Volrabs for a bed in the Hubertus kitchen, though she was shamelessly exploited by these two nimble fatties. She will give thanks on her knees, with her hands clasped.

Sonya spread a napkin over the metal tray, underneath his glass, and before coming out from behind the bar she pulled back her apron, smoothed her hair, and again smiled prettily. Created for a sensitive connoisseur. She would oblige. A little girl to be played with. When she's good, she'll get stockings and she'll be permitted to play the piano. And when she's bad, she'll be whipped.

“Sonya. Last time you told me you wanted to get away from here at any price. I have a nice room for you . . . everything you need.”

The Hotel Hubertus' FIRST FLORICULTURAL EVENING (MUSIC — SINGING — RAFFLE two posters promised, both of them designed by Sonya employing bright crayons she still had from school, one she nailed up on the front door of the hotel, the other on the door of the post office at the Hrusov train station) filled the bar for the first time on a Sunday since the appearance of the local magician Tonik Magik three years before. The manager's wife, Volrabka (a sweaty slippery ball), was in the kitchen diluting the wine and turning out individual servings of salami. The music and singing were provided by Sonya (wearing a new green silk dress — it was the first time she'd ever appeared in the bar without her apron!) playing the ancient piano to frequent applause. At midnight Volrab (a sweaty slippery ball) drew the last of the second barrel of beer and declared the raffle open.

A total of seven customers had, for three crowns apiece, purchased tickets (pages from last year's desk calendar), to which the management of the hotel had added a free carnation (Volrabka had propagated two whole beds of these from a one-crown seed packet), and now Sonya was making the rounds of the tables with a basket containing the collected tickets covered with a napkin and the first (and only) prize (a horribly synthetic Metropol Dessert Wine, product of the Jilemnice starch factory, suddenly withdrawn from sale the year before last). Ticket No. 3, belonging to postmaster Alois Hudlicky (a pale, shy little man wearing lenseless spectacles), was the winner.

“And now our deserving postmaster will take the first and foremost prize of our Carnation Soirée, a bottle of the finest Cinzano Very Special French vermouth — may we have applause—” Volrab thundered in his whiskey bass, Alois Hudlicky bowed distractedly, Sonya smiled prettily, the customers clapped, and Volrab went fluently on: “—and in addition to the first prize, we are adding a further delicacy, our little Sonya, just come closer and you, Postmaster, come up here, sweets for the sweet, a kiss from our little Sonya — may we have some applause—”

Sonya kissed Alois Hudlicky on his sweaty bald pate, the bar filled with applause, and she stuck his carnation into her low neckline and then smiled prettily, the applause intensified. “We want one too—” the forest ranger, Sames, shouted (a fifty-year-old bearded bachelor), “we've paid for the flowers!” and the applause became thunderous, “For every — flower — a buss!” the white-haired veterinarian Srol chanted till his face turned red, and the whole bar lent its support.

“In view of the wishes of the honorable public, instead of a single carnation, we shall reward you all as a favor from our Hotel Administration, one sweet kiss — Sonya, come closer, and you, gentlemen, come up according to the number of the ticket you've drawn, and each of you will get applause as well—” and Volrab admitted each gentleman by number.

No. 1: The hunchbacked blacksmith at Cottex (his tall, beautiful, icy spouse followed his movements from and to their table with great distaste) — Smack!

No. 2: Beda Balada (an intellectual from Usti nad Labem, summer guest of the Hubertus, in Room No. 3) — Smack!

No. 3: The veterinarian Srol (at his table his silent spouse gazed at the tablecloth, after thirty-seven years of married life she did not dare say anything to him.) — Smack!

No. 4: Petrik Metelka (a bachelor colorist at Cottex, whose ears turned red at the moment he fulfilled his secret desire) — Smack!

No. 6: Ranger Sames (with his two thumbs and index fingers he cruelly stretched Sonya's face along its vertical axis, so that he might enjoy the so-called *kiss-and-pinch*) — Smack!

And No. 7: Ruda Mach (from his table Jarunka Slana, Sonya's best friend, grinned at him, she had come to take leave of Ruda forever and spend her last night with him) — Smack! and Smack! (twice in all) and already shouts from the bar: “What's up?!” “Just one!” “Every one should get two!” To this Ruda Mach answered — Smack!

“How people work out their repressed ideas. . .” whispered the pharmacist Berka, wearing dark glasses (upset that he hadn't bought a ticket), his spouse (who also had a university degree) also in dark glasses (they were summer guests, in Room No. 6).

“But the girl really is quite chic,” Alena Berkova said.

During No. 6's buss, Engineer Ziki Holy suddenly got up from his unfinished vermouth (carrying three losing tickets inside his jacket), and soon after him, a mysterious guest wearing dark evening attire disappeared inconspicuously.

“Innkeeper! Where are the rest of the tickets? I'll buy another three!” Ranger Sames shouted, and impatiently he readied his thumbs and index fingers.

“Let's have them here! I'll take five!” shouted silver-haired Srol.

“I'd like a couple more, too, Mr. Volrab,” Petrik Metelka announced softly.

“I'm sorry, sir, but our raffle is quite finished and I must bring it to an end,” Volrab thundered.

“Then let's have another round!” “There couldn't have been only seven tickets!” “I didn't get any!” “One more!”

“That's enough!” Volrab roared so loudly a thick blue vein broke forth in the middle of his bulging forehead, he struck the bar with a bunch of keys and, in the resulting silence, added good-naturedly, “Look here, gentlemen, closing time has long since come and gone. My wife and I are both very much obliged to you, but still you can't ask us to go on serving carnations at only three crowns apiece, when things are going to pot and for half an hour now no one has ordered so much as a beer. You have to agree,

‘When there isn't any money, the show isn't very funny!’”
And once again he struck the bunch of keys against the bar, and then once more. “Or does somebody wish to order something, perhaps?”

And so Ranger Sames ordered another small portion of salami, “plain” (and again he started rubbing his thumbs and index fingers together), the venerable Srol took it into his head to request “another large portion of your headcheese,” but only when the bachelor Petrik Metelka ordered champagne did Volrab consent to go on, and at once he took firm charge of the proceedings.

“Ladies and gentlemen, kindly excuse me, but I shouldn't have to run back to the kitchen for each crappy little request. Mr. Hudlicky, you haven't eaten anything yet! Let's have two portions of real Hungarian salami, and then a bottle of French white, how 'bout it? And Mrs. Sarka'll have Italian salad and Mr. Srol salami with wine and Mr. Sames wine with salami, I'm already off to place the orders and there'll be more carnations. When there's money—you've got it!—the show is funny!”

At the piano, Sonya had turned pale and was smiling feebly, Volrab pushed into the kitchen, sent Volrabka to the garden to pick carnations, and (while Volrabka crawled about the garden with a flashlight in her teeth) skillfully cut the small portions of salami by a good third, he poured one glass from the bottle of wine and then filled the bottle up again with tap water, corked it again, and liberally doused the salami with paprika, pepper, and salt.

The carnations went like hot cakes, gentleman after gentleman got up from his table (in response to Sonya's fervent pleas, Uncle Volrab at last consented that she

merely receive kisses and no longer give them) and the bar resounded without respite with Smack! Smack! Smack!

"I'll wait for you in the room, dear," Ph.Dr. Berkova said in a grating voice to Ph.Dr. Berka, the happy possessor of two carnations (all night long slaps could be heard coming from Room No. 6).

"Aren't you ashamed, it's so vulgar and base—" Lisaveta Baladova said in anger to her (for many years impotent) spouse Beda, who grasped six carnations in his sweaty hand. "I shall hold her as long as I can, to protect her from this mob," the intellectual replied with dignity.

Into the bar stormed the young engineer Jakub Jagr (the guest in Room No. 4, who was attached for a month to the Hrusov branch of Cottex) with a suitcase in his hand. He dropped it rather than set it down, and rolled his eyes at the frantically kissed Sonya.

"What are you doing to her—" he groaned.

The heavy garage door banged shut so that the interrogation—two men growling at one another across the silhouette of the car—would be secret.

"What is your Sonya like?"

"She's. . . She's beautiful."

"Ha! Hmm! Nonsense. Her age—"

"Nineteen."

"Hmm. Height—"

"Five feet six."

"Hmm. Is she fit?"

"Completely. And wonderfully. . ."

"Hmm. Nonsense. How do you know?"

"If only you could see her for just a moment."

“Ha! Hmm! Nonsense. What can she do?”

“Everything.”

“Nonsense. Education?”

“None actually, but. . .”

“Ha! Hmm. So what can she do?”

“Cook. Wash clothes. Make beds. Play the piano and sing.”

“How can she earn a living?”

“She can be a waitress, a telephone operator, a salesgirl, a babysitter. . . the best thing would be a hostess. But I would be happy to take care of her myself. . .”

“Nonsense. Are you fond of her?”

“I'm mad about her.”

“Nonsense. More than about Kamila?”

“That's something different. I've known Kamila for many, many years and I've got used to her.”

“So marry her!”

“But when I love Sonya— do you understand? Even though I've known her only a couple of weeks. I'm fond of Kamila. But I love Sonya and I can't live without her!”

“So marry her!”

“Dad — if I could just bring Sonya home to live with us.”

“You've got to choose one or the other. No woman's worth very much, but still you've got to choose. Make up your mind and then bring the better one home. I mean the one who's less bad. End of conversation.”

Pre-war staff sergeant Jakub Jagr (51, father) energetically passed his hand over his short gray crewcut and set off at a brisk pace. (Now he's disappearing into his room, where no one dare follow him, and in the evening

he'll go out to the garage to hear Jakub's vital decision.)

In torment, the young engineer Jakub Jagr (25, son) pressed his sweaty forehead against the windshield of the car. The one who's less bad.

According to Jakub's valuation tables, the comparison between Kamila and Sonya came out as follows: Kamila totals 455, Sonya 320. But *Education* can be upped to 100 (in Sonya's case), while *Character Traits* (in Kamila's case) show a tendency to deterioration (as can already be seen). And what are all Kamila's 455 points compared to the glowing 100!!! of Sonya's beauty — and if *Love* for Kamila is 100, then love for Sonya must be at least 10,000.

The strong June sun at noon on Sunday beat down upon the young engineer when he emerged from the darkness of the garage, and with dark wet crescents under his armpits he trudged through the baked yard, from the door of the white villa his mother looked at him, but didn't dare ask him anything (Jagr women wait silently for the men's decisions), Jakub lurched through the corridor, with both her legs his sister, Zlatunka, swiftly stopped the motion of her rocking chair, but then went right on rocking (Jagr women are silent even when they want to scream), Jakub avoided the insistence, rage, and despair of his sister's eyes, ran upstairs to his room on the second floor, and double-locked the door behind him.

On the hygienically clean floor protected by a polymer enamel coating, a tightly-woven, firm, thin carpet *bouclé*, bright blue in color (but darkened near the window by the thousandfold marks of a naked, exercising body), metal furniture and a narrow metal bed with a thin, hard mattress, dazzlingly white bed linen, on the wall a spring

exerciser for the biceps, a sculpture of a tiger's head, and two walls covered with bookcases holding a good 355 square feet of technical books, scifi, and mysteries.

Beyond the graceful swaying of the radiant tops of apple and cherry trees, in a similarly beautiful garden, the very similar villa of the Jagrs' neighbors, the Orts, whose daughter Kamila was looking forward to her wedding, as were all the Jagrs and all the Orts, for all was long since decided and readied for the joy and prosperity of the two neighboring houses: the newlyweds Jakub and Kamila will get the luxurious second floor of the Orts' yellow villa, while for Zlatunka and her fiancé the luxurious second floor of the Jagrs' white villa will be vacated, and so the thus united families will live together forever, as in a fairy tale. . .

(Beyond the graceful swaying of the radiant tops of apple and cherry trees, Kamila Ortova is standing in the second floor of the yellow villa, by the window with cream-colored curtains — behind her a large cabinet crammed with her trousseau, the most expensive damasks and the finest linens with red monograms in the corners, the family silver in leather caskets, and crested china — if Jakub doesn't whistle at the garden gate today either, then it's all over for him).

All I have to do now is go downstairs and shout, “I'll marry Kamila!” And my parents will be glad and Zlatunka will be glad, all I have to do is cross the garden and whistle at the Orts' silver-gray garden gate, the elder Orts will smile benignly from their garden table, Kamila, smiling too, will rise and walk toward me along the pebble walk *I would run to meet Sonya*, with Kamila on our Sunday walk to Strizov

Forest *just as so many hundreds of Sundays before*, WITH SONYA IT WOULD ALL BE FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME, by the old oak Kamila will turn her face and passively let it be kissed, *kneeling I would kiss Sonya's knees*, my wedding to Kamila is set for August, the wedding guests will dance on our lawn under Chinese lanterns and in the evening in our bedroom on the second floor Kamila will stand in front of the mirror and slowly begin to remove her wedding veil, *I would see Sonya reflected in that mirror and burst into tears*, Kamila's sweaty face in the maternity ward where my child will be born, *Sonya's sweaty face in the maternity ward where my child will be born*, care for the child would take so much of Kamila's time that she would cease to care for herself, *Sonya will still be beautiful at forty*, Kamila would start getting bored, and me too, *I will love Sonya forever. . .* Now I know that I would not really be happy with Kamila, I REALIZE AT LAST THAT IT IS SONYA I WANT—

The nervous tension of the past few weeks was suddenly swept away by intense happiness, and the young engineer lay down on the floor, groaned, and then, turning on his back, his hands behind his head, he dreamt for hours on the firm blue carpet.

Not until the approach of evening did Jakub get up decisively and pack four white shirts in his suitcase (normally two would have sufficed) and, after a brief hesitation, he added two more, from his secret cache inside the dust jacket of Dorothy L. Sayers' *Murder Must Advertise* he drew out his entire "emergency" cash fund of 2,700 crowns (normally 300 would have sufficed, taken from the envelope marked "Official Travel") and he stuffed it into

his black breast pocket, with a dry feeling in his throat he spread out on the suitcase an elegant pair of shorts made of sparkling scarlet silk (when I bought them, a week ago now, I didn't think about Kamila at all—) and quickly he snapped the suitcase shut and now he was marching and now he was galloping down the stairs.

In the hallway, his father, mother, and Zlatunka looked up from their canasta. Three spreads of cards barely fit among the glasses on the black-stained oak.

“You haven't been to see Kamila today,” his mother remarked into the rigid silence (the twenty-year friendship with the Orts next door is turning into bitter, life-long warfare).

Zlatunka jumped out of her rocker, ran out the door, and banged it behind her (her fiancé will have to begin looking for an apartment at once).

Without a word Jakub quickly walked straight to the garage and stood there with his face to the wall until he heard his father's footsteps behind him and the banging of the heavy garage door.

“I hear—” the staff sergeant barked in the gloom.

“Sonya!”

“Ha! Hmm! Nonsense. Is it definite?”

“Absolutely.”

“Hmm. Good. Kamila was a fine girl — but she doesn't have the spark. I approve.”

“Dad — you really mean—” Jakub turned around and ran toward his father, if the narrow lane between the wall and the car would have permitted, he would even have (the Jagrs never kiss, as a matter of principle) *kissed* him.

“And that Sonya of yours — has she got the spark? Sure! I’ll be able to tell from far away, from the way she walks. You can tell with a horse or a woman. Hmm! Ha! Ha! Bring her here on Saturday!”

“Of course, by all means. I’d be happy to. . . except. . . she may not want to.”

“Ha! Hmm! Nonsense. I want to see her. If she’s got the spark — Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“Now that I’m certain, it will all go quickly. I’ll have a chance to talk with her this evening—”

“A chance to talk with her! Hmm! Nonsense. Men don’t talk with women. Are you a man? Well then! You must conquer her!”

“Yes, Dad.”

“No long drawn-out rigmarole! All is fair in love and war—ha! Everything! You understand? Ha! Ha! Ha!”

“On Saturday I’ll parade Sonya before you.”

Jakub Jagr left via the garden and then, his face rigid, he walked past the fence and the Orts’ silver-gray garden gate. Ort, his wife, and Kamila were sitting at their garden table, silent and flint-like.

(Kamila’s face became rigid and her fine white fingers crushed a corner of the yellow tablecloth, even though it was woven with the red monogram that you chose, Jakub Jagr, tonight will be the last time I shall weep — *it’s only that we’re too close to one another here, don’t you agree? But for that reason we will meet again many times, and under different circumstances* — and Kamila’s face hardened again.) As if on shards crackling under his feet Jakub took the shortcut across the grassy slope that for so many years was my path and yours, Kamila, *we always used to kiss under this*

oak tree, and suddenly moisture forced its way into Jakub's eyes, this our beloved green vale will never again be what it was, as I will never again be a boy, the tears pour over his cheeks and burn, from time immemorial LOVE, WOMEN, SEX, MARRIAGE meant the same thing as Kamila, and breaking up with Kamila suddenly seems the same as amputating my feet. —*Darling Sonya, appear and lighten this my last moment of unhappiness*, but from my shoulderblades wings are already budding — there's nothing for a legless angel to do but fly.

From the longest platform at the Usti train station there's a wonderful view of the Elbe rolling on toward the ocean, and in the final rays golden dust was dancing (Kamila had already ceased to exist), with his suitcase Jakub marched along the concrete platform, and the bright smoke of the Orient-Express made him suddenly feel wonderful, he recalled that he'd had nothing to eat since breakfast and at a kiosk he bought four cold green meat patties and a pocket flask of brandy with a bakelite stopper.

The train rushed across the mightily flowing river and on its rippled surface the fateful day was perishing magnificently, Jakub chewed the meat, gulped down the brandy from the bakelite, and thought of Sonya, she IS wonderful, but she must be stripped of those base habits of the waitress and the maid, of laughing at anyone who buys a glass of beer, of flirting with deliverymen for free, the wife of Engineer Jakub Jagr must be respectable and must have CLASS, to re-educate Sonya toward this end means to reduce her to the molecules from which a new personality can be erected—

It is only a short stroll from the little Hrusov station through the village to the Hotel Hubertus, even shorter at a brisk gait, and out of breath Jakub barged into the hotel with his suitcase—the suitcase which he now dropped rather than set down in the doorway to the bar:

Sonya at the piano in a green dress and around her drunken jubilation and shouting, scumbag after scumbag took her in his arms, pressed her to himself, and shamelessly licked both cheeks, arms, shoulders, and her neck — and Sonya did not *defend* herself in the least, Sonya even *smiled* — and from the bar her guardian Volrab watched and *laughed* — from the kitchen doorway her guardian Volrabova *laughed* at the sight — and Volrab signed up more and more scumbags and guffawed at the entire company.

“What are you doing to her?” groaned Jakub.

“It's a floricultural evening.” the ebullient Ph.Dr. Berka informed him. “Wouldn't you like to have a kiss too? For a mere three crowns in the local currency, and that girl really puts on a performance! Get your change ready and join the line there by the counter.”

Sonya's pale face and green frock kept disappearing behind the red, sweat-streaked napes and the unbuttoned jackets of the scumbags, and reappearing after a frightfully muggy smacking of lips, with her dress woefully rumpled and on Sonya's face yet another damp red stain, Sonya's pitiful smile — or was it a smile of pleasure?! — one customer would take her whole face in his hand, the next one would hook her face with his elbow and then slide his free hand over the contours of her body—

Jakub rushed out of the bar into the cool night, it's only a short stroll from the Hotel Hubertus to the station, even shorter at a mad dash, beyond the station there's nothing but a dark meadow and woods, with his suitcase in hand Jakub ran through the darkness of the woods, stumbled on roots, and ran on and up all the way to the crest of the mountains, and in the glassy gleam of the moonlight, lying among the black skeletons of trunks uprooted by a tempest, he wept bitterly.

Infinitely later, toward morning, he got up and knocked on the door of the sleeping Hotel Hubertus, under the stars, so clear here because they're so close, and only the murmur of the mountain stream answered out of the night's coolness. Jakub set down his suitcase and with both his fists he began to hammer away at the poster that began with the words FIRST FLORICULTURAL EVENING.

With a lit flashlight in her hand Sonya came at last to open the door, over her long nightshirt a shabby greatcoat (a very fat gentleman's) and barefoot on the cold stone floor . . . you wanted to weep for her.

"Sonya, I love you! I really do! And I've decided to marry you."

Sonya rubbed her bare ankles against one another and smiled prettily at Jakub.

"Sonya, you can't stay here another day. I'll find you a job and a place to live. And then I'll take you home with me, to Usti—"

"Uncle and Auntie won't let me go."

"Sonya! You must come with me. I love you. Today I broke my engagement for your sake. I can't live without you. Do you hear? I love you!"

Sonya took a step back, away from Jakub, the cone of light from the flickering flashlight shone on the contours of her waist, the bend of her elbow, the curve of her neck beneath the cascade of glittering liquid copper hair, 100!!! Sonya's beauty soared to a score of at least 100,000, Jakub reached for her and pressed her against the wall, suddenly he lurched, blinded by the shining lens pressed to the bridge of his nose, and already she had torn free of him, then the rattle of a key in the lock and Sonya's laughter behind the locked door.

As if beaten up, Jakub crawled to the hotel entrance and in his room No. 4 he slammed down his suitcase. When he opened it, the red silk of the shorts lying on top struck him a vicious blow below the belt.

With clenched fists Jakub marched across his bare room, and when he began to feel cramped there, he marched up and down the nighttime second-floor corridor on the red coconut matting past the doors of the hotel rooms, MEN DON'T TALK WITH WOMEN, *are you a man?* I haven't been, Dad, but now I will be (from room No. 6 slaps and a woman's cries), YOU MUST CONQUER HER (from room No. 5 the "Big Beat" of consummated love), ALL IS FAIR IN LOVE AND WAR—

Jakub flew down the stairs to the ground floor, on the way he fingered his breast-pocket wallet crammed with its emergency 2,700 crowns, *wouldn't you like to have a kiss too? For a mere three crowns that girl really puts on a performance! Get your change ready and join the line* — when she's given so much, then why not me too, again Jakub fingered the wad of banknotes over his heart, *no long*

drawn-out rigmarole and I'll buy that girl 900 times running.

The front door of the hotel was locked and so was the door to the kitchen, of course. But not the toilet for the bar's customers (crumpled carnations on wet paving stones) and Jakub crawled through the narrow window and jumped down into the darkness of the courtyard.

The kitchen window was wide open and from the inside, through the complete darkness, shone an odd, narrow, zigzag chink stretching across the room, suddenly it moved, swelled up, and then zigzagged again, evidently the floricultural evening was still in progress — no matter, I too will up the stakes—

Jakub swung through the window, crept toward the transverse, chest-height strip of light, and inserted one hand into it, he was grasping a featherbed from beneath and firmly he yanked it off: underneath the featherbed, lying on her stomach in her long nightshirt, Sonya was reading a book by the beam of her flashlight.

“Listen here, Mr. Jagr!” she hissed.

“Forgive me, Sonya, I just thought that. . .”

“Shh! — You have no business thinking! Get right out of here!”

“I can't leave, Sonya, till you promise me. . .”

“Shh! — I'll promise you tomorrow, but now get out or you'll wake Uncle!”

“I could spit on that fat, vile, no-good—”

“Shh! — Jakub . . . go away!”

“Sonya, you're so wonderful and beautiful and—”

“Shh! — Let go of me, or— Shh!”

“Sonya. My love—”

“Shh!”

After a little jostling, Jakub felt Sonya's soles on his chest, he leaned toward them and was kicked so hard he stumbled and knocked over a chair. Sonya slipped out of bed and ran to another door.

“Stop or I'll shoot!” Volrab's voice could be heard from that direction.

“My husband's got a gun!” Volrabka shrieked from the same direction.