

The MELANCHOLY of RESISTANCE

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Translated from the Hungarian by
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A NEW DIRECTIONS BOOK

It passes, but it does not pass away

AN EMERGENCY

Introduction

SINCE THE PASSENGER TRAIN CONNECTING THE icebound estates of the southern lowlands, which extend from the banks of the Tisza almost as far as the foot of the Carpathians, had, despite the garbled explanations of a haplessly stumbling guard and the promises of the stationmaster rushing nervous on and off the platform, failed to arrive ('Well, squire, it seems to have disappeared into thin air again ...' the guard shrugged, pulling a sour face), the only two serviceable old wooden-seated coaches maintained for just such an 'emergency' were coupled to an obsolete and unreliable 424, used only as a last resort, and put to work, albeit a good hour and a half late, according to a timetable to which they were not bound and which was only an approximation anyway, so that the locals who were waiting in vain for the eastbound service, and had accepted its delay with what appeared to be a combination of indifference and helpless resignation, might eventually arrive at their destination some fifty kilometres further along the branch line. To tell the truth, none of this really surprised anyone any more since rail travel, like everything else, was subject to the prevailing conditions: all normal expectations went by the board and one's daily habits were disrupted by a sense of ever-spreading all-consuming chaos which rendered the future unpredictable, the past unrecallable and ordinary life so haphazard that people simply assumed that whatever could be imagined might come to pass, that there were only one door in a building it would no longer open, that wheat would grow head downwards into the earth not out of it, and that, since one could only note the symptoms of disintegration, the reasons for it remaining unfathomable and inconceivable, there was nothing anyone could do except to get a tenacious grip on anything that was still tangible; which is precisely what people at the village station continued to do when, in hope of taking possession of the essential limited seating to which they were entitled, they stormed the carriage doors, which being frozen up proved very difficult to open. Mrs Plauf, who happened to be on her way home from one of her customary winter visits to relatives, took full part in the pointless struggle (pointless since, as they soon discovered, no one actually remained standing), and by the time she had shoved aside those who stood in her way and used her tiny frame to hold up the crowd pressing behind her in order to assure herself of a rear-facing window seat, she could no longer distinguish between her sense of indignation at the intolerable jostling she had just endured and a different feeling, oscillating between fury and anguish, occasioned by the awareness that she, with her first-class ticket, which was quite worthless in this stench of garlic sausage blended with the aroma of mixed-fruit brandy and cheap pungent tobacco surrounded as she was by an almost menacing ring of loud-mouthed, belching 'common peasants' would be faced by the acute uncertainty faced by all those engaged in what was in any case the risky business of travelling nowadays, in other words not knowing whether she would arrive home at all. Her sisters, who had lived in complete isolation ever since age had rendered them immobile, would never have forgiven her if she had neglected to pay them her regular early-winter visit and it was on their account that she refused to abandon this dangerous enterprise even though she was as certain as everyone else that something around her had changed so radically that the wisest course under the circumstances would have been to take no risks at all. To be wise, however, soberly to anticipate what might lie in store, was truly no easy task, for it was as if some vital yet undetectable modification had taken place in the eternally stable composition of the air, in the very remoteness of that hitherto faultless mechanism or unnamed principle—which, it is often remarked, makes the world go round and of which the most imposing evidence is the sheer phenomenon of the world's existence—which had suddenly lost some of its power, and it was because of this that the troubling knowledge of the probability of danger was in fact less unbearable than the common sense of foreboding that something anything at all might happen and that this 'anything'—the law governing its likelihood becoming apparent in the process of disintegration—was leading to greater anxiety than the thought of an

personal misfortune, thereby increasingly depriving people of the possibility of coolly appraising the facts. To establish one's bearings among the ever more frightening events of the past months had become impossible, not only because there was little coherence in the mixture of news, gossip, rumour and personal experience (examples of which might include the sharp and much too early cold snap at the beginning of November, the mysterious family disasters, the rapid succession of railway accidents and those terrifying rumours of gangs of criminal children defacing public monuments in the distant capital, between any of which it was hard to find any rational connection), but also because not one of these items of news meant anything in itself, all seeming to be merely omens of what was referred to by a growing number of people as 'the coming catastrophe'. Mrs Plauf had even heard that some people had started to talk of peculiar changes in the behaviour of animals, and while this—for the time being at least, though who knows what might happen later—could be dismissed as irresponsible and harmful gossip, one thing was certain, that unlike those to whom this signified a state of utter chaos Mrs Plauf was convinced that, on the contrary, it was perfectly appropriate in its timing since a respectable person hardly dared set foot outside her house any more, and in a place where a train could disappear 'just like that' there was, or so her thoughts ran on, 'no sense left in anything'. And this was how she prepared herself mentally for the ride home, which was bound to be far less smooth than the outward journey, cushioned as she had then been by her nominal status as a first-class passenger. Since, as she pondered nervously, 'anything might happen on these dreadful branch-lines' and it was best to steel oneself for the worst; so she sat like one who would happily make herself invisible. Straight-backed, her knees schoolgirlishly clamped together, wearing a chilly, somewhat contemptuous expression, among the slowly diminishing huddle of people still tussling for seats, and while she kept a suspicious eye on the terrifying gallery of undefined faces reflected in the window her feelings swung between anxiety and yearning, thinking now of the ominous distances ahead and now of the warmth of the house she had had to leave behind; those pleasant afternoons with Mr Má dai and Mrs Nuszbeck, those old Sunday walks along the tree-lined avenue of Friars' Walk, and finally the soft carpets and delicate furniture of home, that radiantly calm order of carefully tended flowers and all her little possessions, which, as she well knew, was not only an island in a wholly unpredictable world where afternoons and Sundays had become merely a memory but the one refuge and consolation of a lonely woman the orderliness of whose life was calculated to produce peace and calm. Uncomprehendingly, and with a certain degree of envious contempt, she realized that her noisy fellow travellers—most likely coarse peasants from the darkest nooks and corners of distant villages—were quickly adapting themselves even to such straitened circumstances: to them it was as if nothing unusual had happened, everywhere there was the rustling of greaseproof paper being unwrapped and food being doled out, corks were popping, beer-can lids were dropping to the great floor, and here and there she could already hear that noise 'so calculated to offend all one's finer feelings' but, in her opinion, 'perfectly common among common people' of munching and crunching; and what was more, the party of four directly opposite her, who were among the loudest, had already started dealing a deck of cards—till only she was left, solitary, sitting even more stiffly among the increasingly loud human hubbub, silent, her head determinedly turned to the window, her face protected from the seat by a sheet of newspaper, clutching her clipped handbag to her with such terrified and resolute suspicion that she hardly noticed the engine up ahead, its two red lights probing the frozen darkness, drawing uncertainly out into the winter evening. A discreet sigh was her only contribution to the noises of general relief (grunts of satisfaction, whoops of joy) that after such a long and chilly period of waiting something at last was happening; though this did not last long, since having travelled barely a hundred metres from the now silent village platform and after a few clumsy

jerks—as if the order permitting them to start had been unexpectedly revoked—the train can judderingly to a stop; and though the cries of frustration soon gave way to puzzled and angry laughter once people realized that this state of affairs was likely to continue and were forced to admit that the journey—possibly because of the extended chaos owing to the employment of an off-timetable train—was sadly destined to vacillate between lurching forward and lurching to a halt, they all relapsed into jokey indifference, the dull insensibility that ensues when one has been forced to accept certain facts which simply goes to show how people behave when, having failed, infuriatingly, to understand something, they try to suppress the fear caused by genuine shock to a system which seems to have been overtaken by chaos, the nerve-rackingly repeated instances of which may be met with nothing but withering sarcasm. Although their crude incessant joking ('I should take so much care when I'm in bed with the missus ...!') naturally outraged her delicate sensibilities, the stream of ever ruder cracks with which each hoped to trump the one before—jokes, in any case, now dying away—had a relaxing effect, even on Mrs Plauf, and, every so often, on hearing one of the better ones—and there was no real escape from the coarse laughter that followed in each case—she herself couldn't entirely suppress a shy little smile. Slyly and carefully, she even ventured a few momentary glances, not at her immediate neighbours but at those who were sitting further off, and in the peculiar atmosphere of dauntless good humour—since, while the occupants of the carriage (those men slapping their thighs, those women of nondescript age cackling with their mouths full) remained rather fearsome, they seemed less threatening than they had been—she tried to keep her anxious imagination in check and to reassure herself that she might not actually have to face the lurking terrors of the ugly and unfriendly mob by which, her instincts told her, she was surrounded, and that it might only be because of her keen susceptibility to omens of ill-fortune and her exaggerated sense of isolation in such a cold and alien environment, that she might arrive home, unharmed it may be, but exhausted by her state of constant vigilance. To tell the truth, there was very little real basis for hope of such a happy resolution but Mrs Plauf simply couldn't resist the false enticements of optimism: though the train was once again stalled nowhere, waiting minutes on end for a signal, she calmly concluded that they were making 'some kind of progress', and she controlled the nervous impatience occasioned by the regular—alas too frequent—squealing of brakes and periods of unavoidable immobility, since the pleasant warmth that had resulted from the heating being switched on when the engine started had encouraged her to divest herself of her coat, so she no longer had to fear that she might catch a cold on stepping out into the icy wind on arrival home. She adjusted the creases in the stole behind her, spread the fake-fur wrap over her legs, locked her fingers round the handbag swollen by the woollen scarf she had stuffed inside it, and, with an unchangingly straight back, was just looking out again through the window when there, through the filthy glass, she suddenly found herself face to face with a 'peculiarly silent' unshaven man swigging from a bottle of stinking brandy, who, now that she was clad only in a blouse and the little jacket of her suit, was staring ('Lustfully!!') at her perhaps too prominent, powerful breasts. 'I knew it!'—quick as lightning, despite a hot flush running right through her, she turned her head away, pretending she hadn't noticed. For several minutes she didn't move a muscle, but stared blindly into the darkness outside, and tried, vainly, to recall the man's appearance (conjuring up only the unshaven face, the 'somehow so dirty' broadcloth coat and the uncouth, sly yet shameless gaze which she was finding so disturbing ...), then, very slowly, trusting that she ran no risk in doing so, she allowed her eyes to slide across the glass, withdrawing immediately when she discovered not only that 'the creature in question' was persisting in his 'impudence', but that their eyes had met. Her shoulders, neck and nape were all aching because of the rigid posture of her head, but by now she couldn't have torn her eyes away even if she had wanted to, because she felt that whichever way she turned beyond the narrow

darkness of the window, his terrifyingly steady gaze would easily commandeer every nook of the carriage and 'snap her up'. 'How long has he been looking at me?'—the question cut Mrs Plauf like a knife, and the possibility that the man's dirty raking eye had been 'on her' from the very start of the journey made the gaze, whose meaning she had understood in a flash in the very second of contact, appear even more terrifying than before. These two eyes, after all, spoke of sickeningly 'fond desires'—'worse still!' she trembled—it was as if some sort of dry contempt burned within them. While she couldn't think of herself as an old woman, not precisely, she knew she was past the age when this kind of attention—not uncommon when paid to others—was still natural, and so, as well as regarding the man with a certain horror (what kind of person is it, after all, who is capable of lustiness after elderly women?), she was frightened to realize that this fellow stinking of cheap brandy wanted nothing more perhaps than to make her ridiculous, to mock and humiliate her, then laughingly toss her aside 'like an old rag'. After a few violent jolts the train now began to pick up speed, wheels clattered furiously on rails, and a long-forgotten feeling of confusion and acute embarrassment took hold of her as her full, heavy breasts started to throb and burn under the man's fixed, uncontrollable and threatening gaze. Her arms, with which she could at least have covered them, simply refused to obey her: it was as if she had been specially selected, helpless to cover the shame of her exposure, and as a consequence she felt ever more vulnerable, ever more naked, ever more conscious of the fact that the more she yearned to conceal her thrusting womanhood the more it drew attention to itself. The card players ended another round with an outburst of crude bickering which broke across the hostile and paralysing hum—cutting, as it were, the bands that tightly bound her and prevented her escaping—and she would almost certainly have succeeded in overcoming her unfortunate torpor had not something even worse suddenly happened, the sole purpose of which, she realized in despair, was to crown her suffering. Driven as she was by her instinctive embarrassment and in an act of unconscious defiance she was just trying to hide her breasts by tactfully inclining her head, when her back bent awkwardly her shoulders slumped forward and she realized in a moment of terror that her bra—perhaps due to her unusual physical exertion—had come unclipped behind her. She looked up aghast, and was not at all surprised to see the two male eyes still fixed steadily on her, eyes that winked at her with an air of complicity, as if aware of her ridiculous ill-fortune. Mrs Plauf knew all too well what would happen next, but this almost fatal accident so disturbed her that she only sat stiffer than ever in the accelerating train, helpless once more, her cheeks burning with embarrassment, having to suffer the malicious look of glee in those contemptuously self-confident eyes which were now glued to her breasts, breasts which, freed from the encumbrance of the bra, jogged merrily up and down with the jolting of the carriage. She didn't dare look up again in order to check this, but she was sure it was the case: it was no longer just the man but all those 'loathsome peasants' staring at her discomfort; she could practically see their ugly, greedy, grinning faces encircling her, and this humiliating torture might have gone on for ever had not the conductor—an adolescent lout with a bad case of acne—entered the carriage from the rear compartment; his harsh, recently broken voice ('Tickets please!') finally freed her from the grip of shame, she snatched her ticket from the handbag and folded her arms below her breasts. The train stopped again, this time where it was supposed to, and—even if only to avoid having to contemplate the genuinely frightening expressions about her—she mechanically read the name of the village on the faintly illuminated signboard above the platform, and could have cried out with relief at recognizing it from the familiar because exhaustively perused timetables she had endlessly consulted before any journey, knowing that only a few minutes from now they would be arriving at the county town where ('He'll get off! He must get off!') she would almost certainly be free of her pursuer. Tense with excitement, she watched the slow approach of the conductor through

the derisive clamouring of those who wished to know why the train was so late, and though she had intended to ask for help as soon as he came to her, his baby-face wore an expression of such helplessness in the surrounding racket, an expression so unlikely to offer her the assurance of official protection, that by the time he was standing next to her she felt so rattled it was all she could do to ask him where the washroom was. 'Where else should it be?' the boy answered nervously as he punched her ticket. 'Where it's always been. One at the front, one at the back.' 'Ah yes, of course,' mumbled Mrs Plauf with an apologetic gesture and leapt from her seat clutching her handbag to her, scuttling back down the carriage, swaying now left now right as the train lurched off again, and it was only once she had reached the place of desolation masquerading as a WC and leaned gasping against the locked door that she realized she had left her fur coat hanging on the hook by the window. She knew she had to move as fast as possible and yet it took her a full minute before—surrendering all thought of dashing back for her expensive fur—she could pull herself together and, rocked to and fro by the juddering of the train, divest herself of her jacket, quickly pull the blouse over her head and, holding coat, blouse and handbag under her arm, tug her pink slip right up to her shoulders. Her hands trembling with nervous haste, she brought her bra round and, seeing ('Thank heaven!') that the clasp was not broken, sighed in relief; she had just begun clumsily to dress when she heard behind her the tentative but clearly audible sound of someone outside knocking at the door. There was about this knocking some peculiar quality of intimacy which, naturally enough in the light of all that had happened so far, succeeded in scaring her, but then, on reflecting that the fear was probably no more than a monstrous product of her own imagination, she grew indignant at being hurried like this; and she continued her half-finished movement, taking a perfunctory glance in the mirror, and was just about to reach for the handle when there came another burst of impatient knocking, quickly succeeded by a voice announcing: 'It's me.' She drew her hand back aghast, and by the time she had formed an idea of who it was, she was overtaken less by a sense of entrapment than by desperate incomprehension as to why this croaky strangled male voice should bear no trace of aggression or loss of threat but sound vaguely bored and anxious that she, Mrs Plauf, should at last open the door. For a few moments neither stirred a muscle, each waiting for some word of explanation from the other, and Mrs Plauf only grasped the monstrous misunderstanding of which she had become the victim when her pursuer lost patience and tugged furiously at the handle, bellowing at her, 'Well! What is it to be?! A tease, no nookie?!' She stared at the door, terrified. Not wanting to believe it, she bitterly shook her head and felt a constriction at her throat, startled, like all those attacked from an unexpected quarter to find that she had 'fallen into some infernal snare'. Reeling at the thought of the sheer unfairness of the naked obscenity of her situation, it took her some time to comprehend that—however incredible—since as a matter of fact she had always resisted the idea—the unshaven man had from the very start believed that it was she who was propositioning *him*, and it became clear to her how, step by step, the 'degenerate monster' had interpreted her every action—her taking off her fur ... the unfortunate accident ... and her enquiring after the washroom—as an invitation, as solid proof of her compliance in a word as the cheap blush-worthy stages of a low transaction, to the extent that she now had to cope with not only a disgraceful attack on her virtue and respectability but the fact that this filthy repulsive man, stinking of brandy, should address her as if she were some 'woman of the streets'. The wounded fury which seized her proved even more painful to her than her sense of defencelessness, and—since apart from anything else, she could no longer bear the entrapment—driven by desperation, in a voice choking with tension, she shouted to him: 'Go away! Or I shall cry for help!' On hearing this, after a short silence, the man struck the door with his fist and, in a voice so cold with contempt that shivers ran down Mrs Plauf's back, he hissed at her: 'Go screw yourself, you old whore. You're not worth

breaking down the door for. I wouldn't even bother to drown you in the slop-pail.' The lights of the county town pulsed through the window of the cabin, the train was clattering over points, and she had to stop herself falling over by grasping at the handrail. She heard the departing footsteps, the sharp slamming of the door from corridor to compartment, and, because she understood by this that the man had finally released her with the same colossal impudence as he had accosted her, her whole body trembled with emotion and she collapsed in tears. And while it was really only a matter of moments, it seemed to last an eternity, that in her hysterical sobbing and sense of desolation she saw, in a brief blinding instant, from a height, in the enormous dense darkness of night, through the lit window of the stalled train, as if in a matchbox, a little face, her face, lost, distorted, out of luck, looking out. For though she was sure that she had nothing more to fear from those dirty, ugly, bitter words, that she would be subject to no new insults, the thought of her escape filled her with as much anxiety as the thought of assault, since she had absolutely no idea—the effect of each of her actions so far being precisely the reverse of that calculated—what it was she owed her unexpected freedom to. She couldn't bring herself to believe it was her choking desperate cry that frightened him off, since having felt a miserable victim of the man's merciless desires throughout, she, by the same token, considered herself an innocent and unsuspecting victim of the entire hostile universe, against whose absolute charge—the thought flashed across her mind—there is no valid defence. It was as if the unshaven man had actually raped her. She swayed in the airless, urine-smelling booth, broken, tortured by the suspicion that she knew all there was to know, and under the spell of the formless, inconceivable, ever-shifting terror of having to seek some protection against this universal threat, she was aware only of an emerging sense of agonizing bitterness: for while she felt it was deeply unfair that she should be cast as an innocent victim rather than an untroubled survivor, she who 'all her life had longed for peace and never harmed a soul', she was forced to concede that this was of little consequence: there was no authority to which she could appeal, no one to whom she might protest, and she could hardly hope that the forces of anarchy having once been loosed could afterwards be restrained. After so much gossip and so much terrifying rumour-mongering, she could now see for herself that 'it was all going down the drain', for she understood that while her own particular immediate danger was over, in 'a world where such things happen' the collapse into anarchy would inevitably follow. Outside she could already hear the impatient grumbling of passengers preparing to get off and the train was noticeably slowing down. Realizing, panic-stricken, that she had left her fur coat wholly unguarded, she hastily unbolted the door, stepped out into the press of people (who, ignoring the fact that there was no point in it, engaged in the same storming of doors on the way out as they had on the way in) and, stumbling across suitcases and shopping bags, struggled back to her seat. The coat was still there but she didn't immediately see the fake-fur wrap and while conducting a furious search and trying desperately to remember whether she had taken it with her into the washroom it suddenly dawned on her that in all that nervous excitement her assailant was nowhere to be seen: obviously, she thought, much assuredly he must have been one of the first to leave the carriage. At this moment the train actually stopped by the briefly less stuffy, partially vacated, carriage was almost immediately overrun by an even larger and, if possible, more frightening mass of bodies, more frightening because silent, and while it was easy to see that this dark huddle would give rise to equal anxiety over the remaining twenty kilometres, there was a still greater shock in store for her: if she had hoped to be rid of the unshaven man she was to be bitterly disappointed. Having gathered up her coat and finally located her wrap under the worn and shining seat, she gathered it about her shoulders and had, just for safety's sake, stepped out to find another carriage in which to continue her journey, when—she could hardly believe her eyes—there was the very same broadcloth coat ('As if he had left it there expressly for me to see!') thrown

carelessly across the back of a distant seat. She stopped dead in her tracks, then hurried on, through the back door into the next carriage where she pushed her way through another silent mass of people to find another central rear-facing seat which, in desperation, she immediately occupied. For some time she kept her eyes fixed on the door, ready to leap up, though she no longer knew of whom she was most frightened, nor from what direction the danger was most likely to threaten, then, nothing untoward having happened (what with the train still standing in the station), she tried to gather her remaining strength so that should some awful adventure befall her she would at least be ready. Suddenly she felt infinitely tired, but though her weak legs were practically burning in the lining of her boots and her aching shoulders felt 'ready to collapse' she was unable to relax even a little, or on to the extent of slowly turning her head about to relieve the pain in her neck and reaching for her compact to cool her tearful flushed face. 'It's over, over, there's nothing to be scared of now,' she kept muttering to herself without believing it: for not only did she lack any such confidence, but she was unable even to lean back in her seat for greater comfort without increasing, as she thought, the risk of leaving herself unprepared. For the carriage was being occupied by a crowd 'every bit as ugly as the first lot' and not a whit less frightening than that at the start of her journey, so she could only hope that the three empty seats around her—the last empty seats—might act as some kind of defence and remain unoccupied. There was indeed some chance of that, at least for a while, because, for practically a whole minute (the train whistle blew twice in the interval), not a single new passenger entered the carriage; but suddenly, at the head of a new wave, loudly puffing and panting and carrying a enormous backpack and basket, balanced by a few well-filled shopping bags, a fat headscarved peasant woman appeared in the doorway, and turning her head this way and that way ('Like a hen . . . it occurred to Mrs Plauf), took a decisive step towards her and, grunting and croaking with an aggression that brooked no argument, proceeded to colonize all three seats with her endless baggage which formed a barricade for her as well as Mrs Plauf from the throng of contemptible (or so her expression suggested) travellers behind her. It would have been useless of course for Mrs Plauf herself to have muttered a word of complaint and, suppressing her fury, she came round to thinking how it might even have been a stroke of good luck that, having lost the comforting cushion of space around her, she was at least preserved from the encroachments of the silent mob, but this feeling of consolation was short-lived, for her unwelcome fellow traveller (all she wanted was to be left in peace) loosened the knot binding her headscarf under her chin and, without a moment's hesitation, launched into conversation. 'At least the place is heated, eh?' The sound of that raven-like croaking and the sight of two piercing malicious eyes that seemed to leap at her from beneath the headscarf decided her immediately that, since she could neither repel nor escape her, the only course of action was to ignore her entirely and she turned her head away to look out of the window in protest. But the woman, having cast a few more contemptuous looks down the carriage, was not bothered in the slightest. 'You don't mind me talking to you? There's just the two of us so we might as well have a good natter, eh? Going far? Right to the end of the line, me. Visiting my lad.' Mrs Plauf glanced at her reluctantly, but seeing that the more she ignored her the worse things would get, nodded in acknowledgement. 'Because,' the woman perked up at the encouragement, 'it's the grandson's birthday. He said to me, at Easter, he did, sweet little bairn, 'cause I was there then: You're coming, mam, aren't you? That's what he calls me, mam, that's his name for me, the little lad. So that's when I'm off to now.' Mrs Plauf felt constrained to smile here but immediately regretted it because she opened the floodgates: there was no stopping the woman now. 'If that little bairn only knew what a hard life it is for us old folk nowadays . . .! Spend the whole day standing about in the market on your poor feet, and what with the varicose veins and all, no wonder a body gets tired by the end of the day

Because, you know, to tell you the truth, we do have a little garden, but the pension hardly stretches don't know where all those shiny Mercedes come from, all that money people seem to have, I honest don't. But you listen here, I'll tell you something. It's thieving is what it is, thieving and cheating! It's a Godless crooked world, God has no say in it any more. And this awful weather, eh? You tell me what it's all coming to. It's all round you, isn't it? Radio says it'll be seventeen degrees or whatever—below freezing, that is! And we're only at the end of November. You want to know what'll happen? I'll tell you. We'll freeze till spring. That's right. 'Cause there's no coal. I wish I knew why we had all those no-good miners up in the hills. Do you know? There, you see.' Mrs Plauf's head was swimming in the verbal downpour but however hard it was to bear she found it impossible to interrupt her, to make her shut up, and eventually, realizing the woman wasn't really expecting her to listen and that she could get away with nodding every so often, she spent more and more time looking out of the window at lights slowly drifting by, attempting to bring some order to her troubled thoughts while the train drew away from the county capital, though hard as she tried she couldn't banish the memory of the carelessly discarded coat which bothered her even more than did the frightening ill-omened crowd of silent faces that confronted her. 'Was he disturbed?' she fretted. 'Did drink get the better of him? Or has he deliberately ...' She made up her mind not to torture herself with vain surmise, but, however risky the enterprise appeared, to ascertain whether the coat was still there, so, wholly ignoring the lumpen woman, she joined those loitering at the end of the carriage, crossed over the coupling and peered as carefully as she could through the gap of the door which had been left partly open. Her intuition that it would be better to investigate the unshaven man's unexpected disappearance was immediately rewarded, for there, to her horror, he was, sitting with his back to her, his head just tipped back to swig at the bottle of brandy. Lest he, or anyone else among that dumb crew, should notice her (for in that event God himself could hardly absolve her of bringing her troubles on herself), still holding her breath, Mrs Plauf returned to the rear carriage, and was dumbfounded to see that a full-hatted figure had taken advantage of her brief absence to occupy her seat practically unopposed, so that she, the only lady present, would have to travel standing, pressed against the side of the carriage and she realized she had been rather stupid in deluding herself that, simply because she hadn't seen him for a few minutes, she had been freed of the man in the broadcloth coat. Whether he had gone to the lavatory or popped out to the platform ('Surely not without his coat?!') to get himself another bottle of stinking spirits was completely immaterial now as she was not really worried that he would try to get at her again here on the train, since the crowd—provided it didn't turn against her ('A full coat, a boa or my handbag might be enough for these people ...!')—and the difficulty of making one's way across it, did, after all, offer some kind of defence; at the same time her mistake forced her to admit, since she might as well face the worst that could befall her, that in the case of some beastly mishap ('... some incomprehensible, mysterious act of fate') she would be firmly trapped and that throughout the time there would be no escape. Next to her helplessness this was what most terrified her, since with the passing of immediate danger, the greatest threat, on reflection, was not so much that he would want to rape her (though 'just to pronounce the word is awful ...') but that he looked to be the sort of creature who 'knew neither God nor man', who, in other words, had no fear of hellfire, and was therefore capable of anything ('Anything!'). Once more she could see before her those ice-cold eyes, that bestial unshaven face, once again she saw his sinister and intimate wink, once more heard the flat, mocking voice saying: 'It's me', and she was sure that she was not dealing with a simple senile maniac but had in fact escaped some vast murderous fury whose nature it was to crush under its heel whatever remained whole, for the very concepts of order, peace or the future were to such a monster inimical. 'On the other hand,' she could hear the hoarse voice of the old baggage who was no

directing her never-ending stream of conversation at her new neighbour, 'you look in a pretty bad way if you don't mind me saying so. I got nothing to complain of, you see. Just the usual troubles of old age. And the teeth. Look,' and shoving her head forward she opened her mouth wide for her fur-capped neighbour's examination, drawing her cracked lips apart with her forefinger, 'time's ravage all gone. But I don't let them mess about in there! The doctor can waffle on as much as he likes! The lot'll get me to the cemetery, eh? They're not going to get rich on me, all these scoundrels, may the innards drop out, the lot of them! 'Cause you look here,' and from one of her shopping bags she drew forth a little plastic soldier; 'what do you think this cost me, this little bit of rubbish! Believe it or not they wanted thirty-one forints for it! For this piece of trash! And what's it got for that price? A gun and this red star. They have a real cheek asking thirty-one forints for that! Ah, but,' she stuffed it back into her bag, 'that's all children want nowadays. So what can an old girl like me do? Buy it. You grin your teeth but you buy it! That's right, eh?' Mrs Plauf turned her head away with loathing and took a quick look out of the window, and then, hearing a dull thump, her glance darted back at them and she found herself unable to look away or stir an inch. She didn't know whether it was a bare knuckle that had done the damage, since the unchanging silence failed to reveal what had happened or why, all she saw in that quick involuntary movement of her eye was the woman falling backwards ... her head slipping to one side ... her body, supported by her luggage, remaining more or less where it was, while the fur-capped man opposite ('the usurper of her seat') moved from his forward-leaning position, his face expressionless, and slowly sat back. Even when it is only some annoying fly being swatted you expect some general murmur, but no one stirred in response to this, not a word was spoken, everyone continued standing or sitting in perfect indifference. 'Is it silent approval? Or am I imagining things again?'—Mrs Plauf stared in front of her, but she immediately rejected the possibility she had been dreaming, because judging by all she had seen and heard, she couldn't but believe that the man had hit the woman. He must have had enough of her nattering and simply, without a word, struck her a blow in the face, and no, her heart thumped, no, it can't have been otherwise, and in the meantime all this course was so shocking that she could only stand rooted to the spot, her brow breaking out in perspiration at the fear of it. That woman is slumped there unconscious, the sweat poured down her brow, the man in the fur cap is motionless, and so she stood helplessly, seeing only the window before her, the window-frame and her own reflection in the dirty glass, then the train, which had been forced to stall for a few more minutes, started up again and, exhausted by the furious succession of images in her mind buzzing, she watched the dark empty landscape swimming by outside under the heavy sky in which, even in the moonlight, the masses of cloud were barely distinguishable. But neither the sky nor the landscape meant anything to her and she only realized she had practically arrived when the train clattered over the level-crossing over the main road leading into town, and she stepped out into the corridor, stood before the door and, bending to the shadow cast by her hand, saw the local industrial warehouses and the clumsy water-tower looming above them. Ever since her childhood, such things—level-crossings on highways, long flat buildings steaming in unbearable heat—were the first reassuring reminders that she had arrived home still in one piece, and although this time she had particular cause for relief, since they would bring to an end circumstances of no ordinary hardship, and could almost feel the wild drumming in her heart that used to start up whenever she returned from her infrequent visits to relatives, or from the county capital where, once or twice a year, she attended the performance of some favourite operetta together with some members of her dispersed family, where the friendly warmth of the town served as a natural bastion protecting her home, now, and indeed for the last two or three months, but particularly now, after the shameful revelation that the world was full of people with unshaven faces and broadcloth overcoats, nothing of that sense of intimacy remained.

but a cold maze of empty streets where not only the faces behind the windows but the windows themselves stared blindly out at her and the silence was 'broken only by the sharp yelp of bickering dogs'. She watched the approaching lights of town and once the train had passed the industrial estate with its car park and was making its way along the row of poplars lining the track which was only just discernible in the darkness, she anxiously scanned the as-yet-pale and distant glow of streetlamps and illuminated houses to locate the three-storey block containing her apartment—anxiously, for the feeling of acute relief on realizing that she was home at last was immediately succeeded by terror because she knew all too well that the train being now almost two hours late she couldn't count on the usual evening bus service, and so would have to walk ('And, what is more, alone ...') all the way home from the station—and, even before confronting that issue, there still remained the problem of actually getting off the train. Small allotments with kitchen gardens and locked sheds sped by beneath the window, followed by the bridge over the frozen canal and the old mill behind it; but they conveyed no sense of release, suggesting rather further, fearful stations of her cross, because Mrs Plauf was almost crushed by the knowledge that while she was only a few steps from freedom, suddenly there loomed behind her back, at any moment, some wholly incomprehensible something might leap out and attack her. Her whole body was covered in sweat. Hopelessly she observed the extended yard of the sawmill with its piles of logs, the tumbledown railwayman's hut, the old steam engine slumbering in the sidings and the weak light percolating through the barred glass walls of the repair sheds. There was still no movement behind her, she was still standing by herself in the corridor. She gripped the icy cold handle of the door but couldn't decide: if she opened it too early someone might push her out, too late then 'that inhuman band of murderers' might catch up with her. The train slowed alongside an infinitely long row of stationary wagons, and squealed to a halt. As the door opened, she practically leapt off, saw the sharp stones between the sleepers, heard her pursuers behind her, and quickly found herself outside in the station forecourt. No one attacked her but by some ill-chance which coincided with her arrival the lights in the vicinity suddenly went out, as did, so it soon transpired, every other light in town. Looking neither left nor right but keeping her eyes firmly at her feet so she shouldn't stumble in the dark, she hurried over to the bus-stop hoping against hope that the bus might have waited for the train to come in, or that she might still catch the night-service, should there be one. But there was not a single vehicle waiting, nor could she count on the 'night-service' since, according to the timetable hanging beside the main entrance to the station, the last bus was precisely the one that would have left soon after the scheduled arrival of the train, and in any case the whole sheet was ruled through with two thick lines. Her attempts to forestall the others were all in vain, for while she stood perusing the timetable, the forecourt had become a dense forest of fur caps, greasy peasant hats and ear-flaps, and, as she was gathering courage to set out on her own, she was assailed by the terrible question of what all these people were doing here anyway; and the feeling she had almost forgotten—the awful memory of which had been practically washed away by other feelings in the rear of the compartment, now stabbed at her again as she saw, among the crowd loitering to the left of her, on the far side, the man in the broadcloth coat; it was as if he were searching about, looking for something, then he turned on his heels and was gone. This all happened so quickly, and he was so far away from her (to say nothing of the fact that it was dark and it had become almost impossible to distinguish the genuine from monsters of the imagination), that she couldn't be absolutely certain it was really him, but the mere possibility so scared her that she cut through the idle ominous mass of bodies and, almost at a run, set off down the wide main road leading home. As it happened she wasn't altogether surprised, for however unreal this seemed (hadn't her whole journey been utterly unreal?!) even on the train, when to her great disappointment she spotted him a second time, something inside her had


whispered that her involvement with the unshaven man—and the terrifying ordeal of the attempted rape—was far from over, and that now, when she had not only the fear of ‘bandits attacking her from behind’ to drive her forward but the prospect of him (‘If it really was him, and the whole thing wasn’t just imagination’) leaping out at her from some doorway, her feet stumbled on as if unable to decide whether it was more advisable in such a tight spot to retreat or run ahead. She had long left behind the enigmatic square of the station forecourt, had passed the junction with Zöldág Road which led to the pediatric hospital, but not a soul did she encounter (meeting someone she knew might be her salvation) below the bare wild chestnut trees of the unswervingly straight avenue, and beside the sound of her own breath, the light squeak of her footsteps and the humming of the wind in her face she heard nothing, only the steady quiet puffing of what might have been some distant, unrecognizable machine whose sound vaguely reminded her of an ancient sawmill. Although she continued to resist the force of circumstances which seemed to have been created expressly to challenge such resolution in the complete absence of streetlight and the still oppressive silence she began to feel ever more like a victim cast to her fate, for wherever she looked, seeking the filtered lights of apartments, the place assumed the look of all cities under siege, where, regarding all further effort as pointless and superfluous, the inhabitants have surrendered even the last traces of endangered human presence in the belief that while the streets and squares have been lost, the thick walls of buildings behind which they cower afford shelter from any serious harm. She trod the uneven surface of rubbish frozen to the pavements and had just passed the minimal display of the ortopéd shop, a once popular showroom of the local shoe-manufacturing cooperative, when, before crossing over the next junction, more out of habit than anything else (owing to the petrol shortage there hadn’t been much traffic even when she set out to visit her relatives), she took a glance down the darkness of Erdélyi Sándor Road which because the closed precincts of the law courts and the jail with their high, barbed-wire-topped walls running the length of it, was known by the locals simply as ‘Judgement Street’. Down in its depth around the artesian well, she glimpsed a clotted mass of shadows, a dumb group, who, it suddenly seemed to her, were silently beating someone. In her fright she immediately took to her heels, even now and then casting a look behind her, and only slackened her pace once she knew that the law courts were far behind and that no one had emerged to pursue her. No one had emerged and no one was following her, nothing disturbed the deathly calm of the necropolis, except the increasingly loud audible puffing, and in the terrifying ripeness of that silence, to which the unbroken quiet round the artesian well, where some crime, for what else could it be, was being committed, raised an echo (not a single cry for help, not the single smack of a blow), it no longer seemed strange that there should be so few stragglers about, though despite the almost quarantine-like isolation of individuals in ordinary circumstances, she should by now have met one or two nighthawks like herself in a thoroughfare as broad and long as Baron Béla Wenckheim Avenue, especially so close to the city centre. Driven by her sense of foreboding, she hurried on, feeling ever more convinced that she was crossing some nightmare terrain permeated by evil, then, as she got ever closer to the source of that now clearly audible puffing, and through the bars of the wild chestnut trees could see the heap of machinery which produced it, she felt quite certain that, exhausted as she was by her struggles against the powers of terror, she was imagining, simply imagining everything, for what she saw in that first glance seemed not only stupefying but downright impossible. Not far from her, a spectral contraption was moving with a melancholy pace through the winter night down the middle of the road—that is if this satanic conveyance, whose desperately slow crawl reminded her of a steamroller struggling to gain each centimetre of ground, could be said to be moving at all: it wasn’t even a matter of overcoming strong wind resistance on the normal road surface, but of ploughing through a tract of dense, refractory clay.

Sheathed in blue corrugated iron and sealed on every side, the lorry, which reminded her of an enormous wagon, was covered with bright yellow writing (an indecipherable dark-brown shape hovered at the centre of the inscriptions) and was much higher and longer—she noted incredulously—than those vast Turkish trucks that used to pass through town, and the whole shapeless hulk, which smelled vaguely of fish, was being drawn by a smoking, oily and wholly antediluvian wreck of a tractor which was making fearful exertions in the process. Once she caught up with it though, her curiosity overcame her fear and she paced along beside the vehicle for a while, peering at the clumsy foreign letters—obviously the work of an inexperienced hand—but even up close their meaning remained inscrutable (could it be Slavic ... or Turkish? ...), and it was impossible to say what purpose the thing served, or indeed what it was doing here at all in the very heart of this frosty, windswept and deserted town—or even how it had managed to get here since, if this was its normal speed, it would have taken years for it to have made it from the nearest village, and it was hard to imagine (though there seemed no alternative) that it would have been brought in by rail. She lengthened her stride again and it was only once she had left the awesome juggernaut behind and glanced back that she spotted a heavily built and bewhiskered man with an indifferent expression on his face, wearing only a vest on top, with a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, who—once he noticed her on the pavement—pulled a face and slowly raised his right hand from the wheel as if to greet the gaping figure outside. All this was highly unusual (to crown it all, it must have been rather overheated in the cabin for the mountaineer's face of flesh behind the wheel to feel so warm), and the more she kept glancing back at the vehicle as she moved away, the more exotic a monster did it seem, encapsulating in its appearance all that life had recently thrown at her: the past, it seemed to say, was no longer what it had been but was crawling remorselessly ahead below the windows of unsuspecting people. From this moment she was convinced she was in the grip of a terrible nightmare, only there was no waking from this one: no, she was quite certain that it was reality, only more so; furthermore she realized that the chilling events in which she had been participant or to which she had been witness (the appearance of the phantasmagoric vehicle, the violence in Erdélyi Sándor Road, the lights going off with all the precision of an explosive device, the inhuman rabble in the station forecourt, and above all this, dominating everything, the constant unremitting stare of the figure in the broadcloth coat) were not merely the oppressive creations of her ever-troubled imagination, but part of a scheme so co-ordinated, so precise, that there could be no doubt of their purpose. At the same time she was constrained to make every effort to reject such an extraordinary fantasy, and she kept hoping that there might be some clear, however depressing explanation for the mob, the weird truck, the outbreak of fighting, or, if for nothing else, for the extraordinary power cut that affected everything; all this she hoped because she couldn't quite allow herself to lapse into a wholesale acceptance of a state of affairs so irrational as to permit the general security of the town to go down the drain together with every other sign of order. Sadly she had to forgo even this slim hope: for while the issue of the blacked-out streetlamps remained unresolved, the destination of the truck with its terrible load, and the nature of that load, were not to remain a mystery for long. She had passed the house of the local celebrity, György Eszter, had left behind the night noises of the park surrounding the old Wooden Theatre and had reached the tiny Evangelical Church when her glance happened to light on a round advertising pillar: she stopped dead in her tracks, stepped closer, then simply stood, and, in case she had made a mistake, read and reread the text which looked like the kind of thing a tramp from some outlying estate might scrawl, though a single perusal should have been enough since the poster, which had obviously been freshly pasted over all the others and still showed traces of fresh paste at the edges, offered an explanation of sorts. She thought that if she could finally isolate one distinct element of the chaos, she would find it easier to orientate herself

and so ('God forbid it should be necessary ...!' of course) defend herself 'in case of a total collapse' though the feeble light shed on this by the text only increased her anxiety, the problem all along having been that nothing seemed to provide the faintest shadow of an explanation for the whole cycle of events she had been forced to witness as victim or bystander, till now—as if that 'feeble light' ('The Biggest Whale in the World, and other sensational secrets of nature') were all too much at once—when she was driven to speculate whether there might not be some firm, yet incomprehensible reason at work in this. Because, well, a circus? Here?! When the end of the world was all too imminent? Fancy allowing such a nightmare menagerie, to say nothing of that evil-smelling beast into the town! When the place is threatening enough as it is! Who has time for entertainments now when we're in a state of anarchy? What an idiotic joke! What a ridiculous, cruel idea! ... Or could it be ... could it mean precisely that ... that it was all over and it didn't matter any more? That someone was 'fiddling while Rome burned'?! She hurried away from the pillar and crossed the road. There was a row of two-storey houses on that side, some with a faint light sifting through their windows. She gripped her handbag firmly and leaned into the wind. Reaching the last doorway, she took a quick

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look round, opened the door and locked it behind her. The banisters were icy cold. The palm tree which had been the one jealously guarded splash of colour in the house—and which had been plainly beyond rescue even before her departure—was now most certainly past resuscitation, having frozen to death in the winter. There was a suffocating silence around her. She had arrived. A slip of paper with a message on it had been stuck behind the handle of the door. She took the briefest glance at it, pulled a face then entered turning the keys in both locks and immediately engaging the safety chain. She leaned against the door and closed her eyes. 'Thank heaven! I'm home.' The flat was, as people say, the well-deserved fruit of several years of careful work. When her second husband of blessed memory died suddenly and tragically some five years ago as the result of a stroke and she had had to bury him too, and then, not much later, when her relationship with her son from the first marriage, a boy 'always in flight, always on the move' with never any improvement in prospect'—resembling in this his father, from whom he clearly inherited the heavy burden of his tendency to depravity—also became untenable and he moved in a subtlety, not only did she find she could reconcile herself to the unavoidable, she even felt a little ease in her mind, for however depressed she was by the

consciousness of her loss (she had, after all, lost two husbands and—a son as well), she could clearly see that there was no longer any reason why, at the age of fifty-eight, having always been 'one or other man's fool', she should not at last live entirely for herself. She therefore exchanged—at a notably handsome profit—the family house, which was now too big for her

for a 'darling' little flat in the city centre (with intercom in the gateway), and, for the first time in her life, while her acquaintances accorded her unusual respect on account of her loss of two husbands and only tactfully mentioned the son who was generally known to be no good, she, who had up till then owned no more than some bedlinen and the clothes she stood up in, set about the full enjoyment of her own property. She purchased soft imitation-Persian rugs for her floors, tulle curtains and 'gaily coloured' blinds for her windows, then, getting rid of the old cumbersome wall unit, installed a new one; heeding the smart advice of the locally highly popular magazine *Interiors*, she refurbished her kitchen on modern lines, had the walls newly painted, chucked out her clumsy old gas convector, and completely refitted the bathroom. She knew no fatigue, she was, as her neighbour, Mrs Virág acknowledged, bursting with energy; but she only began to feel really in her element once the major work was over and she could start prettifying her 'little nest'. She was full of ideas: her imagination knew no bounds and she would return from shopping expeditions with, now, a hall mirror in a wrought-iron frame, now, a 'so-practical' onion-slicer and now, some eye-catching clothes-brush with, wondrous to behold, an inlaid panorama of the town on the handle. Despite this, some two years after the sad memory of her son's departure—he had left in tears, she could hardly get him out of the door, and ('for whole days!') she was unable to shake off a fog of depression—and despite the fact that, thanks to two years of feverish activity there was hardly a square inch of unoccupied space remaining in the flat, she still felt strangely disorientated by a sense that there was something missing from her life. She bought the last of a set of sweet little china figurines to complete the collection on her cabinet, but realized all too soon that it was not going to fill the void; she racked her brain, reviewed matters, even asked her neighbour for advice, then, one afternoon (when she happened to be working on the latest piece of 'Irma' embroidery in the comfy armchair), while her eyes were resting on the china swans and gypsy girls with guitars and had moved along the rank of tearful little boys and the recumbent young girls, so conducive to daydreaming and feelings of happiness, it suddenly occurred to her what 'important thing' was missing. Flowers. She did possess two rubber plants and a sickly asparagus that she had brought over from the house, but these fell some way short of providing a satisfactory object for what she referred to as her newly resurrected 'maternal instincts'. And since among her acquaintances, there were many who 'liked pretty things', she soon acquired a range of beautiful cuttings and buds and bulbs, so much so that within a few years spent in the company of green-fingered friends such as Dr Provaznyik, Mrs Má dai and, of course, Mrs Mahó, not only were her window-sills densely populated by carefully tended miniature palms, philodendra and mother-in-law tongue, but she had to order, first one, then three more flower-stands all at once, from a locksmith's shop in the Romanian quarter, because eventually there was nowhere else to put the numerous fuchsias, aluminium plants and armies of cacti, in what her feelings told her had become a 'heart-warmingly homely' little flat. And could it be that all this—the soft rugs, the gaily coloured curtains, the comfortable furniture, the mirror, the onion-slicer, the clothes-brush, the much-praised flowers and the sense of calm, security, happiness and content they provided—was really all as wood to the fire, finished and done with?! She felt utterly exhausted. The slip of paper in her left hand slid from her fingers and fell to the floor. She opened her eyes, looked at the clock on the wall above the kitchen door, watched the frisky second hand skip from digit to digit, and though it seemed impossible that any further danger should threaten her, however she yearned for peace her feelings of insecurity persisted; her mind was racing furiously, now this or the other experience assumed major significance and so—having taken off her coat, pulled off her boots, massaged her heavily swollen feet and tucked them into her warm comfy slippers—she first cast a careful eye up and down the deserted main street from her window (but there was 'not a soul to be seen, no one prowling in the shadows ... only the

enormous circus wagon ... and that unbearable puffing sound ...'), then, to check that everything was there, she went through all her cupboards and wardrobes, and finally interrupted a thorough handwashing, thinking that she had better check all the locks just once more in case she had forgotten the most important one. By this time she had calmed down a little, picked up, read and furiously discarded the note into the kitchen litter-bin (four lines, one under the other, saying 'Hello, Mama, called,' three of them crossed through), then went back into the living room, turned up the heating and, to put an end to all her anxiety, examined each of her plants in turn, for, she reasoned, if she found nothing wrong with them, everything else would fall into place. She had no reason to be disappointed in her obliging neighbour, who, as well as giving the place a daily airing, had been urged to keep a careful eye on her jealously tended flowers: the earth in the pots was nicely damp, and her 'slightly simple and outspoken but essentially good-hearted and conscientious friend' had even thought to dust down the leaves of some of the most sensitive palms. 'Dear Rózsi, so utterly priceless!' sighed Mrs Plauf, in an excess of sentiment, and now that she could see in her mind's eye—however briefly—that ample figure forever bustling about, and could settle back into one of her apple-green armchairs to survey once more her undamaged possessions, everything appeared perfect 'ship-shape order': the floor, the ceiling, the walls with their floral patterns, all surrounding her with such an air of unshakeable security that her previous sufferings seemed merely a bad dream, the ugly product of strained nerves and a sick imagination. Yes, it might all have been a dream, since she, who for years had lived out a routine of spring-cleaning in the spring and jam- and preserve-making in the autumn, of crochet work in the afternoons, and a daily round comprising the usual cares and joys of passionate indoor gardening, had got used to observing the crazy whirlpool, the mad comings and goings of the outside world, from the decent distance and kindly shelter of her inner room, knowing that whatever fell outside its scope was cloudy, formless and uncertain, and now—when she could sit in peace behind the never-yet-disturbed security of her closed doors it was as if she had turned a lock on the whole world—the unfortunate experience of her journey began to seem less real, and a translucent veil seemed to descend between it and her, so she could only just make out the raucous passengers on the branch-line, the petrifying look of the man in the broadcloth coat, the fat woman tipping over to one side, the darkness in which some poor unfortunate was being silently beaten by the crowd of shadows about him; only indistinctly discern the peculiar circus, the thick cross drawn through the yellowed paper of the timetable; and, even more faintly, herself, like a lost soul, trying desperately now this way now that to make her way home. The outlines of her immediate surroundings grew progressively more distinct as her sufferings of the past few hours lost their reality, though the terrible images of the urine-smelling privy, the filthy gravel between the rails and the circus employee waving to her from his cabin still swirled rapidly and unbearably around her mind. Here, surrounded by her flowers and furniture, in the deepening consciousness of her invulnerability she no longer feared an assault and felt the tension due to her constant vigilance slowly dissolve, though this did not alleviate her permanent state of anxiety, which had settled like gruel in her stomach and permeated her whole being. Besides, she felt more exhausted than she had ever felt before, and therefore decided to go immediately to bed. It took her only a few minutes to shower and wash out her underwear, then, drawing a warm dressing gown over her thick nightdress, she looked into the pantry, so that while 'she couldn't really settle down to a proper supper' she might at least pick at a bit of preserve before sleep. Considering the times, the pantry, which served as the hub of the whole flat, contained a surprisingly rich store of food: joints of ham with strings of paprika hung like necklaces about them, spicy sausages and smoked bacon suspended from high hooks and, in the shadow on the floor, a low barricade comprised of bags of sugar, flour, salt and rice; neatly ranged on

either side of the cupboard were further bags, of coffee beans, poppy seeds and walnuts, not mention spices, potatoes and onions, a complete bastion of provisions whose copiousness bore ample witness—much as the beautiful forest of dazzling plants outside did—to its creator’s foresight, the whole crowned by ranks of benevolent-looking jars of preserves arranged with military precision along the shelves lining the middle wall. Here was everything she had had time to bottle since the beginning of summer, from fruit in syrup and various savouries, through tomato juice to walnuts preserved in honey, and she ran her eye over the glittering glassware in her usual way, not quite knowing which to choose, finally returning to her room with a jar of boiled cherries in rum; then, before settling back into the apple-green armchair, more out of habit than genuine curiosity, she turned on the television. She leaned back and stretched out, resting her tired feet on a little pouffe and, refreshed as she was by her shower, in the by-now-pleasant warmth, she was delighted to see that it was operetta time on TV again: perhaps there was hope after all, perhaps the old sense of peace and calm was returning. For she knew very well that while the world remained as infinitely beyond her reach—in her star-struck son’s idiotic phrase, the one he loved to repeat *ad nauseam*—‘as light exceeds vision’, and realized perfectly clearly, that while those, including herself, who snuggled down in quiet little nests, in tiny oases of decency and consideration, continued to go in fear and trembling of events outside, the furious hordes of the anarchic unshaven would instinctively assume command; it was simply that she never rebelled against the ways of the world but accepted its incomprehensible laws, was grateful for its little joys, and therefore felt justified in believing that she could proceed on the assumption, she consoled herself, that fate would spare her and her mode of life. It would spare her and protect the miniature island of her existence; it would not tolerate the possibility that she—and here Mrs Plauf searched for the right words—she who had never desired anything but peace for herself and her fellow human beings, should fall prey to them. The charming delicate strains of the light operetta (*Countess Maritsa ...!* she recognized with an immediate thrill of pleasure) swept through the room like a gentle spring breeze, and once she was away, rocking on ‘sweet waves of song’, the startling images of the emergency train with its freight of vulgar folk which had risen anew to terrify her no longer did so, for what she felt for them now was not so much fear as contempt—in fact precisely what she had felt at the outset of her journey, when she had first glimpsed them in that filthy compartment. The two distinct elements of that unsavoury crowd (‘crude gregarious types scoffing salami’ / ‘silent murderers’) had become so confused in her mind that she felt free at last to look down at them from her eminence, to rise, as it were, above her sorry circumstances, just as the music that flooded from her set rose and covered the earth and all its terrors. It might well be, she speculated then emboldened, splitting another sweet cherry between her teeth in front of the television, that for now the scum gathered out there in the darkness of night had the run of the place, but, in due course and in proper manner, once the racket they made had finally become quite unbearable, they would scurry back where they came from, because, thought Mrs Plauf, that is where they belong, beyond the pale of our fair and ordered world, excluded from it for ever without remission. Until that day arrived, and proper justice was meted out, she went on ever more certain of her own opinions in the matter, let a hell break loose, she would ignore it: she had *absolutely nothing* to do with this mess, this inhuman tyranny, these people who were nothing but jailbait and, while things were as they were, the street being occupied by such, she would not so much as put her foot outside the house, would refuse to have herself involved in any manner, would not hear another word about it until this disgraceful state of affairs came to an end, until the skies brightened and mutual understanding and sober restraint were once again the order of the day. Lulled and fortified by these thoughts, she watched the triumph of Count Tasilo and the Countess Maritsa as, after many trials and tribulations, they found each other

last, and was about to melt weepy-eyed in the overwhelming happiness of the introduction to the finale when, unexpectedly, she heard the buzzing of the intercom in the gateway. She clutched at her heart, shaking with terror ('He has found me! He has followed me!') then, assuming a mask of outrage ('Really! How dare he!'), she glanced up at the clock on the wall and hastened to the gate. It couldn't be either a neighbour or a friend, since, originally as a matter of breeding, and nowadays for lack of courage in tackling the town after seven o'clock at night, people did not call on each other, and so having dismissed from her mind the likelihood that it might be the nightmarish figure in the broadcloth coat, she had little doubt who it actually would be. Ever since she had moved into the sublet of the Harrers, it had, unfortunately, become the practice of her son to turn up at least every third night, often in a wine-sodden state, either to plague her for hours with his mad obsessive talk about stars and planets, or, more frequently on recent occasions, tearfully, bearing flowers to his disillusioned mother was convinced he had stolen 'to recompense her for all the pain he had caused her by his disobedience'. If she had told him once, she had told him a thousand times, in fact every time she finally managed to get rid of him: he was not to come, he was not to bother her, he should leave her in peace, she didn't want to see him, he shouldn't so much as set a foot inside her flat, and yes, she really meant it, really didn't want to see him, that twenty-seven miserable years spent in his company was quite enough, that not a day, not a minute, went by but she blushed in shame at having such a son. As she confessed to her sympathetic cronies, she had tried everything she could think of and later announced that just because her son was incapable of becoming a decent human being she did not see why she should suffer for his behaviour. She had suffered with Valuska senior, her first husband, who had been completely ruined by alcohol, and she had suffered more than enough with her son—she stressed this time and again to all her acquaintances. They advised her—and she often followed their advice—that 'until this mad son of hers gave up his bad habits she should, quite simply, refuse to let him in', but not only was this hard 'for a mother's tender heart to bear', she also had to admit that it was no real solution. After all, it was useless laying down the law while the will that might have enabled him to adopt a normal lifestyle was clearly weak or absent; it was pointless his calling, pointless for Valuska junior—still playing the vagrant—to look in on the third day and proclaim with a radiant expression on his face that 'his will was now resolved', not once but again and again. Resigning herself to the hopeless struggle, to the knowledge that nowadays, in his incurable simplicity, he wouldn't even understand what his mother wanted of him, she invariably sent him packing and that is what she intended to do right now, though when the answer came over the phone instead of the usual stuttering plea ('It's ... it's only me ... mama ...'), she heard the confidential murmur of a woman's voice. 'Who?' asked Mrs Plauf again in her surprise, and for a second she held the receiver away from her ear. 'Only me, Piri love! Mrs Eszter!' 'Mrs Eszter?! Here?! At this time?!'—she exclaimed, and started to fidget irresolutely with her gown. This woman was one of those people whom Mrs Plauf—and as far as she knew, everyone in town—'kept at arm's length'—indeed it was as if they were practically strangers, for apart from giving her the unavoidable but naturally cool nod in the street when they met, she had hardly exchanged a dozen words with her about the weather in the course of the whole year—in the circumstances, therefore, her visit was more than surprising. It wasn't just Mrs Eszter's 'scandalous past, loose morals and currently confused family situation' that made her the perennial topic of her friends' conversation, but also the fact that in her colossal arrogance she refused to acknowledge either that, on the one hand, her rude, bumptious and pushy manner and 'gaudy clothes, so befitting her tub-of-lard figure' offended the more respectable families in the neighbourhood, or, on the other, that her impudent attempts to curry favour through displays of hypocrisy—'enough to put a chameleon to shame'—excited both distaste and opposition.

As if this were not enough, ever since a few months ago she had taken advantage of the lack of vigilance occasioned by the recent disorder and atmosphere of anxiety to get herself appointed—through the influence of her lover, the chief of police—as president of the women’s committee, she had become even more stuck up than before, her jowls wobbling with pride and triumphant glee, or, as a neighbour so neatly put it, ‘glowing with a nauseating smirk of what she considers charm’. On the pretext of a courtesy visit she had managed to worm her way into even those households that until recently were barred to her. It was plain enough that Mrs Eszter was about some such mischief right now, so she padded down towards the gate with the firm intention of giving her a severe lecture on her lack of manners (‘The creature clearly lacks even the most minimal awareness of when it is proper to call on people!’), and to express her general tendency to reticence the most direct way, by sending her packing. However, this wasn’t how things turned out.

It wasn’t how things turned out, nor could it have been, since Mrs Eszter knew very well whom she was dealing with and thought it natural that she, who—as her friend, the chief of police, said, whispered in her ear—was, ‘in terms of height and body-weight, positively gigantic ... not to mention the other things’, should, with her inborn sense of superiority and notorious intolerance of opposition, flatten the resistance of stubborn Mrs Plauf. After sugaring her up with a few crooned ‘my dears’, she adopted a ringing manly tone and proclaimed that while she herself was in absolutely no doubt about the time of night, it was of vital importance that she should speak to her then and there on ‘a private matter that could not be deferred’, and thereupon taking advantage of the brief and predictable paralysis suffered by the shocked Mrs Plauf, she simply bundled her through the gate, stormed up the stairs and, bobbing her head out of habit (‘I wouldn’t want to give it a painful crack’), passed straight through the open door into the hall where, to divert attention from the urgency of her visit, she engaged in little formalities about the ‘excellent situation’ of the flat, the ‘ingenious pattern’ of the hallway carpet and the general ‘enviously refined good taste’—a taste of whose ‘common vulgarity’ she was convinced by the time she had darted a few glances about as she hung up her coat. It would be hard to state with any certainty whether the ‘diverting her attention’ ploy truly represented the precise nature of her intentions, since the fact was that her aim—having regard, that is, to the urgency of her need to spend a quarter of an hour or so with Valuska’s mother before the day was over, so that, if she chanced to meet the following day, she could refer to the visit—might have been achieved in a number of ways; however, despite this, she did not after all choose the solution closest to hand (which was, in fact, immediately to sit down in one of those repulsive armchairs and steer the conversation round to ‘that desire for renovation and rejuvenation so evident in the country at large and, in this context, the now-in-every-way-more-energetic work of the keenly enthusiastic local women’s committee’), for though she had made allowance for it, the cosy comfiness, the stolid air of inactivity and the treacly prettiness of this ‘filthy little viper’s nest’ had such a strong effect on her that, suppressing her repulsion with a great effort born out of tactfulness, she was constrained to examine every item in her hostess’s armoury with the greatest of care. Accompanied by Mrs Plauf, who in her fury and confusion hardly dared to breathe a word, but ran along behind her, red-faced, treading on her heels and readjusting each disturbed item, she ran her eyes carefully over each nook and cranny of the flat stifling under its load of bric-à-brac, and, with feigned appreciation (since ‘it wasn’t yet time to lay one’s cards on the table’), she deployed her booming alto voice to declare, ‘Yes, undoubtedly, women lend meaning to the lifeless objects around them; it is women, and only women, who can provide what we call that individual charm,’ while struggling desperately with the ever more intense temptation to crush one of those little knick-knacks in her enormous palm, to snap it as one would the neck of a chicken, since, damn it all, these comb racks and lace doilies, that swan’s-neck ashtray, the velvet-covered

'Persian' carpet, the ridiculously wispy tulle curtains and, behind the glass of the showcase, the straggling sentimental novels with their hot, sticky, airless contents, most graphically demonstrated her where the world had got to with its petty unbridled indulgence in 'idle pleasures and feeble desires'. She saw and made a mental note of everything, nothing escaped her attention, and taking all in, having summoned all her self-control, she tortured herself further by taking a bitter delight breathing in the scent-polluted air of the flat, which reminded her so precisely of 'the sickening dainty pong of doll's-houses' and which, even a mile away, eloquently proclaimed the pitiable condition of its inhabitant, it was a stink from which she shrank, especially as, even on the threshold it induced in her—or so she was wont to remark with withering sarcasm to the chief of police whenever she returned from one of her informal visits following her election—an earnest desire to vomit. Whether it was just her tendency to mockery or a genuine case of nausea, her friend could be quite certain that she was being subjected to no ordinary trials and tribulations, for ever since 'the spirit of communal will had finally been recovered' sufficiently to elevate her from the position of leader of the local male-voice choir (a post which occasioned her some humiliation and one whose demands were relieved only by that so-called 'exclusive repertoire' of marches, work songs and odes to spring) to president of the women's committee, a figurehead of iron will, she had had to fritter her days away ('hours at a time') in such flats, if only to demonstrate to herself, again and again, that what she had suspected all along was in fact true beyond the shadow of a doubt. For clearly as she saw that it was precisely in such debilitating circumstances—among over-sweetened preserves and fluffy eiderdowns, among rugs with their fringes combed straight and armchairs protected by tightly knotted covers—that every powerful urge came to grief; that it was in this fatal slough—populated by those who considered themselves to be the cream of local society, who in their ridiculous house slippers devoured equally ridiculous operettas and treated simple healthier folk with contempt—that each decent impulse sank to oblivion; she understood the phenomenon all too well, and saw that despite, for example, the months of work following the presidential launch of the epoch-making campaign for renewal, the movement had unfortunately been frustrated. To be honest it was no more than she had expected so she wasn't really surprised when this fine society of parasites, saturated by their own sense of self-worth, coolly rejected her carefully considered arguments, since behind the eternal excuses (such as, for example, 'A clean-up in December? Perhaps later when it's time for proper spring-cleaning ...'), Mrs Eszter saw straight to the heart of their opposition, understanding that their impotence and craven servility sprang from an unreasonable, though, to them, justified, fear of an enterprise that aimed at general renewal, a renewal which, to them, might look like general decay, for in all passionate espousals of the new, people were liable to detect traces of an equally passionate drive towards chaos, and—quite rightly—suspect that the powers unleashed, instead of protecting that which was irrecoverably dead and buried, would smash it to pieces in the good cause of replacing the featureless boredom of their selfish lives with 'the elevating passion of communal action'. One couldn't deny that in this evaluation of the unusual and anarchic events of the immediate past—her confidant, the captain, and one or two right-minded people excepted—she probably stood alone in the town, but this gave her no cause for concern, nor did she think it necessary to reconsider her position because something whispered to her that 'the victory that justified all' would not be long delayed. As to the question of what this victory would consist of, she could not have answered it in one or two simple sentences, but her faith was so firm that however resistant or numerous 'these refined coteries of slippers and old pantaloons' might be she would not be cowed, for not only had she really nothing to fear from them, but she knew full well that the true enemy—and this was why this battle for hearts and minds had become such a personal struggle for her—was György Eszter himself, a man general

regarded as an eccentric hermit living in absolute isolation, but in fact merely sickly and lazy, Eszter her semi-respectable husband-in-name, who, unlike her, 'had no record whatsoever of involvement in civic affairs'—who had attained an ambiguous celebrity in town by spending years lying in bed so that ('let us say') once a week he could take a peek out of his window ... Could he be the true enemy? He was more than that: for Mrs Eszter he was both 'the hopeless and insurmountable walls of hell', and at the same time, her only hope of maintaining her well-earned place among the most influential citizens, in other words a snare, the perfect, faultless trap whose effectiveness it was vain to doubt: one she could neither escape nor wreck. Because, now, as always, Eszter continued to be the key to the operation, the decisive link in the chain of the fulfilment of her high ambition, the very man who years ago, when, owing to what he called his 'back problems', gave up the directorship of the local school of music, told her quite simply and with boundless cynicism that he 'no longer required her household services', and she had had to dig deep into their savings to rent herself a flat by the marketplace, the very man who, to compound his deed—as an act of revenge, for what else could it be?—abandoned such few commitments as they had shared, and resigned his post as director of the town's orchestra, because, apparently, as she was to hear from others, he was no longer interested in anything but music and did not wish to take up his time with other things although Mrs Eszter, anyone, could have told the world what ear-splittingly false notes he jangled out on that del-i-ber-ately out-of-tune piano, only, of course, if and when he could bring himself to rouse that body of his enfeebled as it was by his habit of lounging about, and extricate himself from his monstrous piles of soft cushions and travelling rugs. When she thought back on all those years of endless humiliation, she would happily have given anything to have taken a handy axe and chopped her insufferable husband into tiny pieces there where he lay, but she knew very well that this was the one expedient not even remotely open to her since she had to admit that without Eszter the town would remain closed to her and that whatever she set her mind on she would continually be running up against him. Explaining their separation by reference to her husband's need for solitude and quiet working conditions, she was forced to maintain the appearance of marriage, and to suppress even the thought of a fiercely desired divorce; worse still she had to resign herself to the fact that with the assistance of Eszter's disciple and favourite, the terminally lunatic Valuska, Mrs Plauf's degenerate son from her first marriage, her husband—at first secretly but later quite openly so the whole town knew about it—had taken to doing all the washing, including the 'filthy underclothes'. The situation looked undeniably grave but Mrs Eszter was not to be defeated: though she didn't know whether personal revenge or 'the struggle for the common good' was the more appropriate, or whether it was more important to pay back Eszter ('for everything!') or to render her own rather unstable 'position' impregnable, of one thing she was certain, that this unfortunate state of affairs could not last for ever, and that one day, perhaps even in the not-too-distant future, once she had achieved a fully deserved power and attained high enough rank, she could finally settle the hash of this pathetic scoundrel who was 'determined' to make her laughing stock of her and make her life a misery. And she had sound enough reasons for thinking these things might turn out like this, because (for it wasn't simply a case of, 'It must be so, therefore it will be so') the office of president not only presented the opportunity of 'a free hand and the unfettered exercise of power', but was also an encouraging sign of her growing independence from him—not to mention the fact that since she had discovered how to gain the support of the obstinate bourgeoisie for the drastic measures envisaged by the committee and, at the same time, re-established her useful connection with Eszter, her self-confidence, which had been sadly lacking, was now boundless and she was fully convinced that she was on the right road and that no one could stop her marching directly towards her goal ... The plan was foolproof after all, and, naturally, like all 'strokes of genius', simple

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