

cosmos



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*Translated from the Polish  
by Danuta Borchardt*

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*To my husband, Thom Lane, with gratitude for his  
support, both technical and personal, in the course of  
the translation*

*—D.B.*



## Translator's Note

When I read *Cosmos* many years ago, I thought how beautifully it would read in English. I translated a couple of chapters and submitted them to Professor Stanislaw Barańczak. I was diverted to translating *Ferdydurke*, Witold Gombrowicz's groundbreaking first novel. Now I have come back to *Cosmos*, for which Gombrowicz won the Editor's International Prize for Literature, second in importance only to the Nobel Prize, in 1967. This is the first translation of *Cosmos* directly from the Polish.

*Cosmos* is now considered by some to be the most private of Gombrowicz's works. It is a starkly self-revealing work by the man who, in his *Testament—Conversations with Dominique de Roux*, said about himself: "I am a humorist, a clown, a tightrope walker, a *provocateur*, my works stand on their head to please, I am a circus, lyricism, poetry, terror, struggle, fun and games—what more do you want?" This is what one faces in the process of translating his works, particularly *Cosmos*. The novel calls for empathy, focusing beyond the nitty-gritty of the narrative itself.



Gombrowicz's style has been described as "mad, breathless, sometimes jerky, sometimes lazy." Imagine the task confronting the translator who must find the appropriate words in order to accomplish, in English, what Gombrowicz has set before us, and for which, in the end, he provided no solution—only chicken fricassee for dinner.

Let me mention some of the dilemmas I encountered while translating this work.

Generally speaking, to convey the sense of the work (its characters, themes of darkness and obsessions) as it developed under his pen, Gombrowicz used long sentences, repetitions, lists of words, many of them without commas. I have left these elements unchanged.

Considering that departure from home is one of Gombrowicz's themes, the oscillation between the English "house" and "home"—the word in Polish, *dom*, being the same in both instances—required particular attention.

The words "shame" and "embarrassment" are in Polish one and the same word, *wstyd*. It was important to decide which of the two nuances Gombrowicz had in mind when talking about Lena and her cat. She was, I decided, ashamed of the cat.

In order to develop the onanistic theme of the book, Gombrowicz chose the Polish expression *swoj do swego po swoje*, which he used to convey a succession of meanings. Literally it means "himself to his own for his own," and it refers to buying stuff from your own people—a distant cousin to "buy American," or, more personally, "getting one's gratification from one's own." It first appears, innocently enough, in one of Fuks's remarks as early as the second chapter of the book, and then, in the second half, it gathers momentum and gravity as Gombrowicz gives it self-gratify-

ing, onanistic implications. It seemed necessary to use a progression of English expressions—from Fuks’s “whatever turns you on,” to Venomie’s “her own self, just for herself”—to achieve a satisfactory effect without violating the original text.

One of the central characters, Leon, uses many odd, even bizarre, inventions in his conversation. For example, he creates the nonexistent Polish word *mlimli*, which hints at milk. I thought that “milkie” was, linguistically and phonetically, an adequate transposition into English. Another example is Leon’s incorporation into certain words of the Latin *um*, which led me to such translation as “miraculum miraculosum” to convey his “latinizing” tendency. Another of Leon’s oddities was the word *berg*. It does not exist in the Polish language and I left it untranslated in the English. In its multiple permutations it occurs in *Cosmos* more than one hundred times, as a noun, a verb, an adverb, etc. Leon not only uses it as a masturbatory word but also gives it other, though related, meanings, some of which I translated as “penal-berg,” “love-doveberg,” “pilgrimageberg.”

While translating the initial passages about Ludwik and his hand, I had to be aware that these were the foreshadowing of things to come, and to adequately convey their significance in my translation.

Gombrowicz said, “*Cosmos* for me, is black, first and foremost black, something like a black churning current full of whirls, stoppages, flood waters, a black water carrying lots of refuse, and there is man gazing at it—gazing at it and swept up by it—trying to decipher, to understand and to bind it into some kind of a whole . . .”

As the translator of *Cosmos*, I have the hope of having transmitted no more, no less than what Gombrowicz himself had given us.  
—D.B.



# Cosmos



## chapter 1

I'll tell you about another adventure that's even more strange . . .

Sweat, Fuks is walking, I'm behind him, pant legs, heels, sand, we're plodding on, plodding on, ruts, clods of dirt, glassy pebbles flashing, the glare, the heat humming, quivering, everything is black in the sunlight, cottages, fences, fields, woods, the road, this march, from where, what for, a lot could be said, actually I was worn out by my father and mother, by my family in general, I wanted to prepare for at least one of my exams and also to breathe in change, break loose, spend time someplace far away. I went to Zakopane, I'm walking along the Krupówki, thinking about finding a cheap little boarding house, when I run into Fuks, his faded-blond, carrot-y mug, bug-eyed, his gaze smeared with apathy, but he's glad, and I'm glad, how are you, what are you doing here, I'm looking for a room, me too, I have an address—he says—of a small country place where it's cheaper because it's far away, out in the sticks somewhere. So we go on, pant legs, heels in the sand, the road and the heat, I look down, the earth and the

sand, pebbles sparkling, one two, one two, pant legs, heels, sweat, eyelids heavy from a sleepless night on the train, nothing but a rank-and-file trudging along. He stopped.

“Let’s rest.”

“How far is it?”

“Not far.”

I looked around and saw whatever there was to see, and it was precisely what I didn’t want to see because I had seen it so many times before: pines and fences, firs and cottages, weeds and grass, a ditch, footpaths and cabbage patches, fields and a chimney . . . the air . . . all glistening in the sun, yet black, the blackness of trees, the grayness of the soil, the earthy green of plants, everything rather black. A dog barked, Fuks turned into a thicket.

“It’s cooler here.”

“Let’s go on.”

“Wait a minute. Let’s sit down a while.”

He ventured deeper into the bushes where recesses and hollows were opening up, darkened from above by a canopy of intertwining hazel branches and boughs of spruce, I ventured with my gaze into the disarray of leaves, twigs, blotches of light, thickets, recesses, thrusts, slants, bends, curves, devil knows what, into a mottled space that was charging and receding, first growing quiet, then, I don’t know, swelling, displacing everything, opening wide . . . lost and drenched in sweat, I felt the ground below, black and bare. There was something stuck between the trees—something was protruding that was different and strange, though indistinct . . . and this is what my companion was also watching.

“A sparrow.”

“Ah.”

It was a sparrow. A sparrow hanging on a piece of wire. Hanged. Its little head to one side, its beak wide open. It was hanging on a thin wire hooked over a branch.

Remarkable. A hanged bird. A hanged sparrow. The eccentricity of it clamored with a loud voice and pointed to a human hand that had torn into the thicket—but who?

Who hanged it, why, for what reason? . . . my thoughts were entangled in this overgrowth abounding in a million combinations, the jolting train ride, the night filled with the rumble of the train, lack of sleep, the air, the sun, the march here with this Fuks, there was Jasia and my mother, the mess with the letter, the way I had “cold-shouldered” my father, there was Roman, and also Fuks’s problem with his boss in the office (that he’s been telling me about), ruts, clods of dirt, heels, pant legs, pebbles, leaves, all of it suddenly fell down before the bird, like a crowd on its knees, and the bird, the eccentric, seized the reign . . . and reigned in this nook.

“Who could have hanged it?”

“Some kid.”

“No. It’s too high up.”

“Let’s go.”

But he didn’t stir. The sparrow was hanging. The ground was bare but in some places short, sparse grass was encroaching on it, many things lay about, a piece of bent sheet metal, a stick, another stick, some torn cardboard, a smaller stick, there was also a beetle, an ant, another ant, some unfamiliar bug, a wood chip, and so on and on, all the way to the scrub at the roots of the bushes—he watched as I did. “Let’s go.” But he went on standing, looking, the sparrow was hanging, I was standing, looking. “Let’s go.” “Let’s



go.” But we didn’t budge, perhaps because we had already stood here too long and the right moment for departure had passed . . . and now it was all becoming heavier, more awkward . . . the two of us with the hanging sparrow in the bushes . . . and something like a violation of balance, or tactlessness, an impropriety on our part loomed in my mind . . . I was sleepy.

“Well, let’s get going!” I said, and we left . . . leaving the sparrow in the bushes, all alone.

Further march down the road in the sun scorched and wearied us, so we stopped, disgruntled, and again I asked “is it far?” Fuks answered by pointing to a notice posted on a fence: “They’ve got rooms for rent here too.” I looked. A little garden. In the garden there was a house behind a hedge, no ornaments or balconies, boring and shabby, low budget, with a skimpy porch sticking out, wooden, Zakopane-style, with two rows of windows, five each on the first and second floors, while in the little garden—a few stunted trees, pansies withering in the flower beds, a couple of gravel footpaths. But he thought we should check it out, why not, sometimes in a dingy place like this the food could be finger-licking good, cheap too. I was ready to walk in and look, though we had passed a few similar notices and hadn’t paid any attention, and besides, I was dripping with sweat. He opened the gate, and we walked along the gravel path toward the glittering window-panes. He rang the bell, we stood a while on the porch until the door opened and a woman, no longer young, about forty, came out, maybe a housekeeper, bosomy and slightly plump.

“We’d like to see the rooms.”

“One moment please, I’ll get the lady of the house.”

We waited on the porch, the din of the train still in my head, the journey, the previous day’s events, the swarm, the haze, the roar.

Cascading, overwhelming roar. What intrigued me in this woman was a strange deformity of the mouth in the face of a bright-eyed, decent little housekeeper—her mouth was as if incised on one side, and its lengthening, just by a bit, by a fraction of an inch, made her upper lip curl upward, leap aside, or slither away, almost like a reptile, and that sideways slipperiness slipping away repelled me by its reptilian, frog-like coldness, and, like a dark passage, it instantly warmed and aroused me, leading me to a sin with her, sexual, slippery, and lubricious. And her voice came as a surprise—I don't know what kind of voice I had expected from such a mouth—but she sounded like an ordinary housekeeper, middle-aged and corpulent. I now heard her call from inside the house: "Auntie! A couple of gentlemen are here about the room!"

After a few moments the aunt trundled out on her short little legs as if on a rolling pin, she was rotund—we exchanged a few remarks, yes indeed, there is a room for two, with board, please come this way! A whiff of ground coffee, a narrow hallway, a small alcove, wooden stairs, you're here for a while, ah, yes, studying, it's peaceful here, quiet . . . at the top there was another hallway and several doors, the house was cramped. She opened the door to the last room off the hallway, I only glanced at it, because it was like all rooms for rent, dark, shades drawn, two beds and a wardrobe, one clothes hanger, a water pitcher on a saucer, two small lamps by the beds, no bulbs, a mirror in a grimy frame, ugly. From under the window shade a little sunlight settled in a spot on the floor, the scent of ivy floated in and with it the buzzing of a gadfly. And yet . . . and yet there was a surprise, because one of the beds was occupied and someone lay on it, a woman, lying, it seemed, not quite as she should have been, though I don't know what gave me the sense of this being, let's say, so out of place—whether it was

that the bed was without sheets, with only a mattress—or that her leg lay partially on the metal mesh of the bed (because the mattress had moved a little), or was it the combination of the leg and the metal that surprised me on this hot, buzzing, exhausting day. Was she asleep? When she saw us she sat up and tidied her hair.

“Lena, what are you doing, honey? Really! Gentlemen—my daughter.”

In response to our bows she nodded her head, rose, and left silently—her silence put to rest the thought of anything out of the ordinary.

We were shown another room next door, exactly the same but slightly cheaper because it wasn’t connected directly to a bathroom. Fuks sat on the bed, Mrs. Wojtys, a bank manager’s wife, sat on a little chair, and the final upshot was that we rented the cheaper room, with board, of which she said: “You’ll see for yourselves.”

We were to have breakfast and lunch in our room and supper downstairs with the family.

“Go back for your luggage, gentlemen, Katasia and I will get everything ready.”

We returned to town for our luggage.

We came back with our luggage.

We unpacked while Fuks was explaining how lucky we were, the room was inexpensive, the other one, the one that had been recommended to him would surely have been more expensive . . . and also farther away . . . “The grub will be good, you’ll see!” I grew more and more weary of his fish-face, and . . . to sleep . . . sleep . . . I went to the window, looked out, that wretched little garden was scorching in the sun, farther on there was the fence and the road, and beyond that two spruce trees marked the spot

in the thicket where the sparrow was hanging. I threw myself on the bed, spun around, fell asleep, mouth slipping from mouth, lips more like lips because they were less like lips . . . but I was no longer asleep. Something had awakened me. The housekeeper was standing over me. It was morning, yet dark, like night. Because it wasn't morning. She was waking me: "The Mr. and Mrs. Wojtys would like you to come down for supper." I got up. Fuks was already putting on his shoes. Supper. In the dining room, a tight cubbyhole, a sideboard with a mirror, yogurt, radishes, and the eloquence of Mr. Wojtys, the ex-bank manager, who wore a signet ring and gold cufflinks:

"Mark you, dear fellow, I have now designated myself to be at the beck and call of my better half, and I am to render specific services, namely, when the faucet goes on the fritz, or the radio . . . I would recommend more sweetie butter with the radishes, the butter is tip-top . . ."

"Thank you."

"This heat, there's bound to be a thunderstorm, I swear on the holiest of holies, bless me and my grenadiers!"

"Did you hear the thunder, Daddy, beyond the forest, far away?" (This was Lena, I hadn't seen much of her yet, I hadn't seen much of anything, in any case the ex-manager or the ex-director was expressing himself with a flourish.) "May I suggest a teensy-weensy helping of curdled milk, my wife is a very special specialist when it comes to curdled milkie, and what is it that makes hers the *crème de la crème*, my dear fellow? It's the pot! The quality of milk fermentation depends on the lactic attributes of the pot." "What do you know, Leon!" (The ex-manager's wife interjected this.) "I'm a bridge player, my dears, an ex-banker, now a bridge player in the afternoons as well as Sunday nights, by special wifely

dispensation! So, gentlemen, you are here to study? Quite so, perfect, peace and quiet, the intellect can wallow like fruit in a compote . . . ” But I wasn’t really listening, Mr. Leon’s head was like a dome, elf-like, its baldness riding over the table, accentuated by the sarcastic flashing of his pince-nez, next to him Lena, a lake, and the polite Mrs. Leon sitting on her rotundity and rising from it to preside over supper with self-sacrifice, the nature of which I had not yet grasped, Fuks saying something pallid, white, phlegmatic—I ate a piece of meat pie, still feeling sleepy, they talked about the dust in the air, that the season had not yet begun, I asked if it was cool at night, we finished the meat pie, then the fruit compote made its appearance, and, after the compote, Katasia pushed an ashtray toward Lena, the ashtray had a wire mesh—as if an echo, a faint echo of the other net (on the bed), on which a leg, a foot, a calf lay on the wire netting of the bed when I had walked into the room etc., etc. Katasia’s lip, slithering, found itself near Lena’s little mouth.

I hovered over it, I, who after leaving the other, there, in Warsaw, now became stuck in this, here, and I was beginning to . . . I hovered for one brief moment, but then Katasia left, Lena moved the ashtray to the center of the table—I lit a cigarette—someone turned on the radio—Mr. Wojtys drummed on the table with his fingertips and hummed a little tune, something like ti-ri-ri, but then broke off—drummed again, hummed again and broke off. It was cramped. The room was too small. Lena’s mouth closing and parting, its shyness . . . and that’s it, goodnight, we’re on our way upstairs.

We were undressing, and Fuks, shirt in hand, resumed his complaints about his boss, Drozdowski, he moaned whitely and wanly, carrot-like, that Drozdowski, that at first they got along famously,

then something or other went sour, one way or another, I began to get on his nerves, can you imagine, I get on his nerves, let me move a finger and I get on his nerves, do you understand that, to get on your boss's nerves, seven hours a day, he can't stand me, he obviously tries not to look at me for seven hours straight, and if he happens to look at me his eyeballs skip away as if he'd been scalded, for seven hours! I don't know—Fuks went on, his eyes fixed on his shoes—sometimes I feel like falling on my knees and crying out: Forgive me, Mr. Drozdowski, forgive me! But forgive me for what? And it's not even his fault, I really do irritate him, my friends at work tell me shush, stay out of his sight, but—Fuks ogled me sadly, fish-like, with melancholy—but how can I keep in or out of his sight when we're together in the same room seven hours a day, if I clear my throat, move my hand, he breaks out in a rash. Maybe I stink? And in my mind I associated the lamentations of the rejected Fuks with my departure from Warsaw, resentful, disdainful, both of us, he and I, dispossessed . . . the resentment . . . and so we went on undressing in this rented, unfamiliar room, in a house found by a fluke, by accident, like two castaways, spurned. We talked some more about the Wojtysses, the family atmosphere, I fell asleep. I awoke. It was night. Dark. Buried under my sheets, a few minutes passed before I found myself again in the room with the wardrobe, the night table, the water pitcher, until I found my bearings in relation to the windows and the door—which I managed to do thanks to a persistent though silent cerebral effort. I vacillated for a long time, what should I do, go back to sleep or not . . . I didn't feel like sleeping, I didn't feel like getting up either, so I mulled it over: should I get up, or sleep, or lie here, finally I stuck out my leg and sat up on the bed, and when I sat up the white blotch of the curtained window loomed before

my eyes and, stepping up to it barefoot, I drew the curtain aside: there, beyond the little garden, beyond the fence, beyond the road was the spot where the sparrow was hanging, hanged among the tangled branches, the black soil below it, where the bit of cardboard, the piece of sheet metal, the strips of lath, were lying about, where the tips of spruce were basking in the starlit night. I pulled the curtain back but I didn't move away because it occurred to me that Fuks might be watching me.

In fact, I couldn't hear him breathing . . . and if he wasn't asleep he must have seen that I was looking out the window, which in itself wouldn't be anything perverse were it not for the night and the bird, the bird in the night, the bird with the night. Because my looking out the window must have had something to do with the bird . . . and this was embarrassing . . . but the silence had lasted far too long and was too absolute, bringing me to the certainty that he was not there, that he had not been there all along, that no one lay on his bed. I drew the curtain back again, and by the glow of the starry swarms I saw a vacant space where Fuks should have been. Where did he go?

To the bathroom? No, the hum of water from there was solitary. But in that case . . . what if he had gone to see the sparrow? I don't know why I thought of it, but I knew right away that this was quite possible, he could have gone, he had been interested in the sparrow, he was in the bushes looking for an explanation, his carrot, phlegmatic mug was just the thing for such a search, it was just like him . . . to ponder, to scheme, who hanged it, why did he hang it . . . and, maybe he chose this house, among other things, because of the sparrow (this would be stretching it a bit, but the thought was there, additionally, in the background), anyway, he had awakened, or maybe he hadn't gone to sleep at all, and, his

curiosity piqued, he got up, maybe he went to check some detail and to look around in the night? . . . was he playing detective? . . . I was inclined to believe it. More and more I was inclined to believe it. His doing this did me no harm, on balance, but I would have preferred not to begin our stay at the Wojtyses' with such nocturnal escapades and, furthermore, I was a bit irritated that the sparrow was emerging again, bothering us, and it seemed to fluff its feathers, put on airs and pretend to be more important than it really was—and if this moron had actually gone to it, the sparrow would become a personage accepting visitors! I smiled. What next? I didn't know what to do, yet I didn't feel like going back to bed, I put on my pants, opened the door to the hallway, stuck out my head. There was no one, it was cooler, in the wan darkness I was aware of a little window to the left at the top of the stairs, I listened but heard nothing . . . I went out into the hallway, but somehow I didn't relish the idea that a short while ago he had silently gone out, and now I'm silently going out . . . in sum, our two exits were not quite so innocent . . . And when I left the room I re-created in my mind the floor plan of the house, the branching of the rooms, the arrangement of walls, alcoves, passages, furniture, and even people . . . all unfamiliar, I was barely becoming acquainted with it.

But here I was in the hallway of a strange house, in the dead of night, in just my pants and shirt—this peeked at sensuality, it was like slithering toward Katasia with the same slipperiness as her lip . . . where was she sleeping? Sleeping? As soon as I asked myself that, I became someone walking toward her in the night, down the hallway, barefoot, in just my shirt and pants, the tiny, just-a-tad twirl-up of her lip, slippery and reptilian, together with my cold and disagreeable rejection and estrangement from those I had left



behind in Warsaw, drove me coldly toward her swinish lust which, somewhere here, in this sleeping house . . . Where was she sleeping? I took a few steps, reached the stairs and looked out the little window, the only one in the hallway, it looked out from the other side of the house, the one opposite the road and the sparrow, onto a wide space surrounded by a wall and lit by swarms and multitudes of stars; here was a similar little garden with gravel footpaths and frail little trees, passing farther on into a vacant lot with a pile of bricks and a small shed . . . To the left, next to the house, was an addition, probably the kitchen, the laundry, maybe it was there that Katasia rocked to sleep the frolic of her little mouth . . .

Moonless star-filled sky—stupendous—constellations emerged out of the swarms of stars, some I knew, the Big Dipper, the Great Bear, I was identifying them, but others, unfamiliar to me, were also lurking there, as if inscribed into the distribution of the major stars, I tried to fill in lines that might bind them into forms . . . and this deciphering, this charting, suddenly wearied me, I switched to the little garden, but here too the multiplicity of objects such as a chimney, a pipe, the angle of a gutter, the cornice of a wall, a small tree, as well as their more involved combinations like the turn and disappearance of the path, the rhythm of shadows, soon wearied me . . . yet I would begin anew, though reluctantly, to look for forms, patterns, I no longer felt like it, I was bored and impatient and cranky, until I realized that what riveted me to these objects, how shall I put it, what attracted me to the “behind,” the “beyond,” was the way that one object was “behind” the other, that the pipe was behind the chimney, the wall was behind the corner of the kitchen, just like . . . like . . . like . . . at supper when Katasia’s lips were behind Lena’s little mouth when Katasia moved the ashtray with the wire mesh while leaning over Lena, lowering her slither-

ing lips close to . . . I was more surprised than I should have been, at this point I was inclined to exaggerate everything, and besides, the constellations, the Big Dipper, etc., amounted to something cerebral, exhausting, and I thought “what? mouths, together?” I was particularly astonished by the fact that both their mouths were now, in my imagination, in my memory, more closely linked together than then, at the table, I tried to clear my head by shaking it, but that made the connection of Lena’s lips with Katasia’s lips even more clear-cut, so I smirked, because truly, Katasia’s twirled-up lasciviousness, her slipping into swinish lust had nothing, absolutely nothing in common with the fresh parting and innocent closing of Lena’s lips, it’s just that one was “in relation to the other”—as on a map, where one city is in relation to another city—anyway, the idea of maps had entered my head, a map of the sky, or an ordinary map with cities, etc. The entire “connection” was not really a connection, merely one mouth considered in relation to another mouth, in the sense of distance, for example, of direction and position . . . nothing more . . . but, while I now estimated that Katasia’s mouth was most likely somewhere in the vicinity of the kitchen (she slept thereabouts), in fact I wondered where, in what direction, and at what distance was it from Lena’s little mouth. And my coldly-lustful striving in the hallway toward Katasia underwent a dislocation because of Lena’s incidental intrusion.

And this was accompanied by increasing distraction. Not surprisingly, because too much attention to one object leads to distraction, this one object conceals everything else, and when we focus on one point on the map we know that all other points are eluding us. And I, gazing at the little garden, at the sky, at the “beyond” duality of the two mouths, I knew, I knew that something

was eluding me . . . something important . . . Fuks! Where was Fuks? Was he “playing detective”? I hoped this wouldn’t end in a big mess! I was disgruntled about having rented a room with this fish-like Fuks whom I hardly knew . . . but there, ahead of me was the little garden, the trees, the footpaths passing into a field with a pile of bricks and all the way on to a wall that was incredibly white, but this time it all appeared as a visible sign of something that I could not see, namely the other side of the house, where there also was a bit of a garden, then the fence, the road, and beyond it the thicket . . . and within me the tension of starlight merged with the tension of the hanged bird. Was Fuks there, by the sparrow?

The sparrow! The sparrow! Actually neither Fuks nor the sparrow was of much interest to me, it was the mouth, quite plainly, that really intrigued me . . . or so I thought in my distraction . . . and as I let go of the sparrow to concentrate on the mouth, a tiresome game of tennis evolved, for the sparrow sent me to the mouth, the mouth back to the sparrow, and I found myself between the sparrow and the mouth, one hiding behind the other, and, as soon as I caught up with the mouth, eagerly, as if I had lost it, I already knew that beyond this side of the house was the other side, that beyond the mouth was the sparrow hanging all alone . . . But worst of all, the sparrow could not be placed on the same map as the mouth, it was totally beyond, in another realm, it was here quite by chance, ridiculous actually, so why was it cropping up, it had no right! . . . Oh, oh, it had no right! Had no right? The less justification it had the more strongly it inflicted itself upon me and became more intrusive and more difficult for me to shake off—if it had no right, then the fact that it was pestering me was all the more significant!

I stood a while longer in the hallway, between the sparrow and

the mouth. I returned to my room, lay down, and fell asleep faster than one would have expected.

The next day we took out our books and papers and went to work—I didn't ask him what he had done during the night—I felt reluctant to recall my own adventures in the hallway, I was like someone who had succumbed to fanciful extravagances and now feels awkward, yes, I felt awkward, but Fuks looked sheepish too and mutely turned to his calculations, which were laborious, on numerous scraps of paper, he even used logarithms, his goal being to develop a method at roulette, a method that would be, without the slightest doubt—and he knew it—humbug, tommyrot, but on which he focused all his energies because he had nothing better to do, nothing to keep him busy, his situation was hopeless, his vacation would be over in two weeks, he would then return to his office and to Drozdowski who would make superhuman efforts not to look at him, but there was no way around it because, even if he were to carry out his duties diligently, this too would be unbearable to Drozdowski . . . Exuding yawns, his eyes turned into tiny slits, he even stopped complaining, he was the way he was, who cares, all he could do now was to taunt me about my aggravation with my family, that's it, see, everyone's got his troubles, they're bugging you too, shit, I tell you, it's horrible, it's all a sham!

In the afternoon we went by bus to Krupówki, did some shopping. Suppertime came, I had been waiting for it impatiently because I wanted to see Lena and Kataria, Kataria with Lena, after last night. In the meantime, I restrained myself from thinking about them, first, let me see them again, then think.

But what an unexpected upset of the apple cart!

She was a married woman! Her husband showed up after we had started eating, and now he was bringing his longish nose to

his plate, while I watched this erotic mate of hers with a distasteful curiosity. What confusion—not that I was jealous, it’s just that now she seemed different, totally changed by this man who was so alien to me, yet privy to the most secret closings of her little mouth—it was obvious that they were only married recently, he covered her hand with his hand and looked into her eyes. What was he like? Quite a big man, well built, on the heavy side, intelligent enough, an architect working on the construction of a hotel. He spoke little, reached for a radish now and then—but what was he like? What was he like? And how were they with each other when alone, how was he with her, she with him, the two of them together? . . . ugh, to bump into a man at the side of a woman who turns us on, that’s no fun . . . worse still, such a man, a total stranger, suddenly becomes the object of our—compulsory—curiosity, and we have to keep guessing his personal likes and dislikes . . . even though it disgusts us . . . we have to experience him through the woman. I don’t know which I would prefer: alluring as she is, that she should now turn out to be repulsive because of him, or that she also become enticing because of the man she has chosen—awful possibilities either way!

Were they in love? Passionate love? Sensible? Romantic? Easy? Difficult? Not in love at all? Here, at the table, in the presence of her family, it was just the casual tenderness of a young couple that one could not, after all, watch at will, but only by stealing glances, by applying a whole system of maneuvers “on the border,” that would not transgress the demarcation line . . . I couldn’t very well stare him in the face, my inquiry, ardent yet somewhat disgusting, had to be limited to his hand as it lay on the table in front of me, near her palm, I looked at this hand, big, clean, fingers not unpleasant, nails clipped . . . I continued watching it, and I became

more and more infuriated that I had to penetrate the erotic possibilities of this hand (as if I were her, Lena). I found out nothing. Actually, the hand looked decent enough, but what of it, everything depends on the touch (I thought), on how he touches her, and I could perfectly well imagine their touching each other to be decent, or indecent, or dissolute, wild, mad, or simply conjugal—and nothing, nothing is known, nothing, because why couldn't shapely hands touch each other grotesquely, even astraddle, what assurance was there? Yet it was hard to imagine that a hand, so healthy and decent, would indulge in such excesses. Really, but suppose that it "nevertheless" did, then this "nevertheless" would become yet one more depravity. And if I could not have any certainty about their hands, what about their persons, in the background, where I hardly dared to look? And I knew that a single, clandestine, barely visible hooking of his finger round her finger would be enough for their persons to become infinitely licentious, even though he, Ludwik, was just at that moment saying that he had brought the photos, and that they had come out very well, he'll show them after supper . . .

"What a comical phenomenon," Fuks was finishing his account of finding the sparrow in the bushes on our way here. "A hanged sparrow! Who would ever think of hanging a sparrow? It's like flavoring borscht with two mushrooms instead of just one—it's too much!"

"Two mushrooms, two mushrooms indeed!" Mr. Leon politely assented, happy to agree. "Two mushrooms, now you figuree that, if you please, fiddle-de-dee, but what sadism!"

"Hooligans," opined Mrs. Roly-Poly curtly and picked a thread off his cuff, while he instantly and happily agreed: "Hooligans." To which Roly-Poly replied:

"You always have to contradict!"

"But Marysweetie, I say yes, hooligans!"

"But I say, hooligans!" she exclaimed, as if he had said something different.

"That's right, hooligans, I say, hooligans . . ."

"You don't know what you're saying!"

She straightened the border of the handkerchief sticking out of his breast pocket.

Katasia emerged from the pantry to clear the plates, and her twirled-up, slippery, darting lip appeared near the mouth that was across the table from me—I had been anxiously awaiting this moment while at the same time restraining myself, turning away from it so as not to influence anything, or interfere . . . so that the experiment would come off objectively. Mouth immediately began to "relate to" mouth . . . and I saw that just then her husband was saying something to her, and Leon was butting in, and Katasia was busy walking around, and all the while mouth was relating to mouth, like a star to a star, and this mouth constellation corroborated my nocturnal escapades which I'd rather be done with . . . yet mouth with mouth, that slithering away disgusting twirled-up lip slipping away with that soft and pure mouth closing-and-parting . . . as if they really had something in common! I lapsed into something like a trembling incredulity over two mouths having nothing in common yet having something in common, this fact overwhelmed me and actually plunged me even deeper into unbelievable distraction—and it was all suffused with the night, as if steeped in yesterday, murky.

Ludwik wiped his mouth with a napkin, and, setting it aside in an orderly fashion (he seemed to be very neat and clean, but his cleanliness could actually be filthy . . . ), and he said, in his

bass-baritone voice, that about a week ago he too had noticed a hanged chicken on a spruce by the roadside—but he had not given it much thought, anyway after a couple of days the chicken was gone.

“Oh, wonder of wonders,” Fuks marveled, “hanged sparrows, hanging chickens, maybe it’s an omen that the world is coming to an end? How high up was the chicken hanging? How far from the road?”

He was asking these questions because Drozdowski couldn’t stand him, because he hated Drozdowski, because he didn’t know what else to do . . . He ate a radish.

“Hooligans,” repeated Mrs. Roly-Poly. She adjusted the bread in the basket with the gesture of a good hostess and provider of meals. She then blew off some bread crumbs. “Hooligans! There are lots of kids around, they do whatever they please!”

“That’s right!” Leon agreed.

“The crux of the matter is,” Fuks wanly remarked, “both the sparrow and the chicken were hanged at the reach of an adult’s hand.”

“Well? If not hooligans then who? So you think, siree, that it’s some weirdo? I haven’t heard of any weirdos in this vicinity.”

He hummed ti-ri-ri and with great attention turned to making bread pellets—he lined them up in a row on the tablecloth, watched them.

Katasia pushed the wire-mesh ashtray toward Lena. Lena flicked the ash from her cigarette, while within me her leg responded on the wire netting of the bed, what distraction, mouth above mouth, bird and wire, chicken and sparrow, she and her husband, chimney behind drainpipe, lips behind lips, mouth and mouth, little trees and footpaths, trees and the road, too much, too much, with-



out rhyme or reason, wave after wave, immensity in distraction, dissipation. Distraction. Tiresome confusion, there in the corner was a bottle standing on a shelf and one could see a piece of something, maybe of a cork, stuck to the neck . . .

. . . I glued myself to the cork, and thus I rested with it until we went to bed, then, dreaming, sleeping, for the next few days nothing, nothing at all, a mire of activities, words, eating, going up and going down the stairs, though I did find out this and that, *primo*, that Lena taught foreign languages, she had married Ludwik merely two months ago, they went to Hel Peninsula, now they'll live here until he finishes their little house—all this Katasia told me, kindly, happy to oblige, dustcloth in hand, from one piece of furniture to another, *secundo* (this from Roly-Poly) “it needs to be cut again, then sewn up, the surgeon told me, an old friend of Lena's, I've told Katasia so many times that I'll cover the costs because, you know, she's my niece even though she's a simple peasant from the country, near Grojec, but I'm not one to disown poor relatives, and besides, it's not aesthetic-looking, it offends one's sense of the aesthetic, really, it's just gross, how many times have I told her over the years, because it's already been five years you know, since the accident, the bus ran into a tree, lucky nothing worse happened, how many times have I told her Kata, don't be lazy, don't be afraid, go to the surgeon, have it done, look at yourself, fix your face, but no, well, she's lazy, scared, days pass, once in a while she'll say I'll go, auntie, I'll go right away, but she doesn't, and now we're used to it, until someone reminds us, then it stares us in the face again, and even though I'm sensitive to the aesthetic, imagine the drudgery, cleaning, laundry, do this and that for Leon, then Lena wants something, then do something for Ludwik, from morning 'til night, one thing after another, while the opera-

tion waits, there's no time for it, when Ludwik and Lena move to their little house, maybe then, but in the meantime, it's a good thing that at least Lena has found an honest man, well, let him go and make her unhappy, I swear I'd kill him, I'd grab a knife and kill him, but thank God so far it's not bad, it's just that they won't do anything for themselves, neither he, nor she, just like Leon, she's taken after her father, I have to take care of everything, remember everything, hot water this, coffee that, do the laundry, socks, mend, iron, buttons, handkerchiefs, sandwiches, paper, polish this, glue that, they won't do a thing, steaks, salads, from morning 'til late into the night, and, on top of it, lodgers, you know yourself how it is, I'm not saying anything, it's true they pay, they rent rooms, but I still have to remember things for this one and for that one, have it all on time, one thing after another . . .”

. . . a multitude of other events filling, absorbing me, and every evening, as unavoidable as the moon, supper, sitting across the table from Lena, Katasia's mouth circling around. Leon manufacturing his bread pellets and lining them up in a row, with great care—watching them intently—then after a moment's deliberation impaling a pellet on a toothpick. Sometimes, after reflecting for a while, he would pick up a little salt on the tip of his knife and sprinkle it on the pellet, watching it dubiously through his pince-nez.

“Ti-ri-ri!

“Grażyna\* mine!” he said, turning to Lena, “why don't you toss your Daddydaddy some radishy foodie food? Toss it!”

Which meant that he was asking her to pass him the radishes. It

\*The name of a beautiful princess and also title of a poem about her by Adam Mickiewicz.

was difficult to understand such gibberish. “Oh Grażyna mine, your Daddy’s princess beautiful!” “Roly-Poly my petite, what are you dawdling over, can’t you see I want sucko!” He didn’t always speak in “word-monsters,” sometimes he began crazily and ended quite normally, or vice versa—the shining roundness of his bald dome, his face stuck below it, his pince-nez stuck to that, hovered above the table like a balloon—his mood often turned humorous, and he would crack jokes, mommydear, easy does it, you know the one about the bicycle and the tricycle, when Icyk\* sat on a bicyk, what a tricyk, yahoo! . . . While Roly-Poly would smooth out something around his ear or on his collar. He would sink into a reverie and braid the fringe of a napkin, or push a toothpick into the tablecloth—not just anywhere but in certain spots only, to which, after lengthy reflection and with knitted brow, he would return.

“Ti-ri-ri.”

This irritated me because of Fuks, I knew it was grist for his Drozdowski mill, the mill that kept grinding him from morning until night, because he could not escape returning to his office in three weeks, and then Drozdowski would stare at the heating stove with a martyr-like expression, because, Fuks said, he even gets a rash from my jacket, he’s grown sick of me, it can’t be helped, he’s grown sick of me . . . and Leon’s eccentricities somehow suited Fuks because he watched them with his yellow, pallid, carrotty look . . . and this pushed me even further into resenting my parents, into rejecting all that was there, in Warsaw, and I sat with resentment and hostility, halfheartedly watching Ludwik’s hand that I couldn’t care less about, that repulsed me, that riveted me, compelling me to penetrate its erotic-tactile possibilities . . . then there

\*A variation on the name Isaac.

was Roly-Poly again, I knew, overflowing with activities, laundry, sweeping, mending, tidying up, ironing, etc., etc., and so on and on. Distraction. Swish and swirl. I would find my piece of cork on the bottle, watch the neck and the cork for the sake, I suppose, of not watching everything, the cork became in a way my bark on the ocean, even though only a distant hum reached me from the ocean, a hum too universal and too general to be really audible. And that was all. Several days filled with a little of everything.

The sweltering heat continued. What an exhausting summer! And so it dragged on with the husband, the hands, the mouths, with Fuks, with Leon, it dragged on in the sweltering heat, like someone walking down the road . . . On the fourth or fifth day my eyes strayed, not for the first time actually, far into the room, I was sipping tea, smoking a cigarette, and, having abandoned the cork, I fastened my eye on a nail in the wall, next to the shelf, and from the nail I moved on to the cupboard, I counted the slats, tired and sleepy I forayed into the less accessible places above the cupboard where the wallpaper was frayed, and I went trudging on to the ceiling, a white desert; but the tedious whiteness changed slightly farther on, near the window, into a rough, darker expanse contaminated with dampness and covered with a complex geography of continents, bays, islands, peninsulas, strange concentric circles reminiscent of the craters of the moon, and other lines, slanting, slipping away—sick in places like impetigo, elsewhere wild and unbridled, or capricious with curlicues and turns, it breathed with the terror of finality, lost itself in a giddy distance. And dots, I don't know what from, not likely from flies, their origins totally inscrutable . . . Gazing, drowned in it and in my own complexities, I gazed and gazed without any particular effort yet stubbornly, until in the end it was as if I were crossing some kind of a

threshold—and little by little I was almost “on the other side”—I took a gulp of tea—Fuks asked:

“What are you gawking at?”

I didn’t feel like talking, it was stuffy, the tea. I replied:

“That line there, in the corner, behind the island, and that sort of a triangle . . . Next to the straits.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“What about it?”

“Well . . .”

After a long while I asked:

“What does it remind you of?”

“That smudge and the line?” he took it up eagerly, and I knew why so eagerly, I knew this would distract him from Drozdowski.

“That? I’ll tell you, just a minute. A rake.”

“Maybe a rake.”

Lena joined in the conversation because we were playing at guessing, a parlor game, easy and in keeping with her shyness.

“What do you mean a rake?! It’s a little arrow.”

Fuks protested: “Nonsense, it’s not an arrow!”

A couple of minutes filled with something else, Ludwik asked Leon, “Would you like to play chess, father?” I had a broken fingernail that was bothering me, a newspaper fell to the floor, dogs barked outside the window (two little dogs, young, amusing, off their leashes at night, there was also a cat), Leon said, “One game,” Fuks said:

“Maybe it is an arrow.”

“Maybe an arrow, maybe not an arrow,” I remarked, I picked up the newspaper, Ludwik rose, a bus rolled down the road, Roly-Poly asked “did you make that phone call?”

## chapter 2

I don't know how to tell this . . . this story . . . because I'm telling it *ex post*. The arrow, for instance . . . The arrow, for instance . . . The arrow, at that time, at supper, was no more important than Leon's chess, or the newspaper, or tea, everything—equally important, everything—was contributing to a given moment, a kind of consonance, the buzzing of a swarm. But today, *ex post*, I know it was the arrow that was the most important, so in telling this I move it to the forefront, from a myriad of undifferentiated facts I extract the configuration of the future. But how can one describe something except *ex post*? Can nothing be ever truly expressed, rendered in its anonymous becoming, can no one ever render the babbling of the nascent moment, how is it that, born out of chaos, we can never encounter it again, no sooner do we look than order . . . and form . . . are born under our very eyes? No matter. Never mind. Katasia awoke me with breakfast every morning and, with my eyes just opened from sleep, I would catch above me the impropriety of her mouth, that slippery slipaway lip superimposed on her peasant-woman's

cheeks, looking on, blue-eyed and kindly. Couldn't she have moved away from my bed a quarter of a second sooner? Wasn't she stooping over me a fraction of a second too long? Maybe yes . . . maybe no . . . the uncertainty . . . this possibility burrowed into me as I lay thinking of my nocturnal machinations with her. On the other hand . . . what if she stood over me out of sheer kindness? It was hard to tell, there are substantial obstacles to watching people, it's different with inanimate objects, it's only objects that we can truly watch. In any case, my lying beneath her mouth pinned me down each morning and remained with me throughout the day, maintaining the configuration of her mouth in which I had so stubbornly entangled myself. It was too hot for us to work, we were tired, he was bored, he stewed in his own juices, became a wretch, he was like a howling dog though he didn't howl, he was just bored. The ceiling. One afternoon we lay supine on our beds, the windows were shaded, the afternoon buzzed with flies—and I heard his voice.

"Maybe Majziewicz would give me a job, but I can't leave where I am, it counts as training, I'd lose a year and a half, no doubt about it, I just can't . . . Look there, on the ceiling . . ."

"What?"

"On the ceiling. There, by the stove."

"What?"

"What do you see?"

"Nothing."

"If only I could spit in his mug. But I can't. And why should I? He means well, but I really get on his nerves, his jaw goes out of joint when he sees me . . . Have a better look at that mark on the ceiling. Don't you see anything?"

"What?"

“It’s like that arrow, the one we spotted on the ceiling in the dining room. It’s even more distinct.”

I didn’t answer, one minute, two, then he spoke again:

“The remarkable thing is that it wasn’t there yesterday.” Silence, the heat, my head lies heavy on the pillow, a feeling of faintness, but he spoke again as if clinging to his own words that were floating in the juices of the afternoon: “It wasn’t there yesterday, a spider lowered itself from that spot yesterday and I watched it, I would have noticed the arrow—it wasn’t there yesterday. See the main line in the middle, the shaft itself, that wasn’t there, the rest, the point, the branching at the base, those, I grant you, are the old pockmarks, but the shaft, the shaft itself . . . that wasn’t there . . .” He drew a breath, lifted himself slightly, leaned on his elbow, dust whirled around in a cluster of light rays coming through a hole in the window shade. “The shaft wasn’t there.” I heard him scramble out of bed, and I saw him in his underpants, craning his neck, examining the ceiling—it surprised me—such diligence! That ogling expression! He stuck his ogle face at the ceiling and declared: “*Fifty, fifty*.<sup>\*</sup> Yes or no. Devil only knows.” And he returned to his bed, but I knew he continued looking from there, which I found so tiresome.

After a while I heard him get up again and walk over to look at the ceiling, I wished he’d let it go . . . but he would not let it go.

“The scratch that goes through the center, the shaft itself, mind you . . . I have a hunch, it seems freshly made with a nail. It’s more conspicuous. It wasn’t there yesterday . . . I would have noticed . . . And it points in the same direction as the other, the one in the dining room.”

<sup>\*</sup>In English in text.



I lay there.

“If it’s an arrow, it must be pointing to something.”

I replied: “And if it’s not an arrow it’s not pointing.”

Last night, at supper, while examining Ludwik’s hand with that disgusting curiosity of mine—again!—I shifted my gaze to Lena’s hand that also lay on the table, and then the little hand seemed to tremble or coil ever so slightly, I was not at all sure, yet *fifty, fifty* . . . But as to Fuks, I didn’t like it, maybe it even infuriated me that whatever he did or said derived from Drozdowski, from disrespect, dislike, disgust . . . all the “dises” . . . well, if only I didn’t have my own problems with my parents in Warsaw, but the two together, one fed on the other. He was talking again.

He stood in his underpants, in the center of the room, talking. He suggested that we should see if the arrow pointed to anything—“what’s the harm in checking, if we’re satisfied it doesn’t point to anything, it will give us blessed peace, then it will be clear this is not an arrow that anyone has drawn on purpose but merely an illusion—there’s no other way to establish whether it’s an arrow or not an arrow.” I listened silently, I wondered how to refuse him, he insisted rather weakly, but I felt weak too, weakness pervaded everything. I suggested he check it himself if he was so keen on it—he began to insist that I would be indispensable to him in establishing the exact direction because someone has to go out, mark the direction in the hallway, in the garden—finally he said, “Two heads are better than one.” And all at once I agreed, I even rose immediately from my bed because the thought of a thrusting, resolute motion along a fixed line suddenly seemed more delectable than a glass of cold water!

We pulled our pants on.

The room now filled with decisive and clear-cut activities

that, originating as they did from boredom, from idleness, from whimsy, concealed some kind of idiocy within them.

The task was not easy.

The arrow didn't point to anything in our room, we could tell at a glance, so it was necessary to extend its course through the wall, to see if it connected with anything in the hallway, and then continue the line as accurately as possible into the garden—this called for rather complicated maneuvers that he really wouldn't have managed without my participation. I went down to the garden and pulled out a rake from a small shed so that I could use the handle to show the line on the lawn which would correspond to the one that Fuks was signaling to me with a broomstick from the staircase window. It was close to five in the afternoon—the burning-hot gravel, the drying grasses around the young trees that gave no shade—that was down below—while above, white whorls of large, roundish clouds drifted in the mercilessly blue sky. The house gazed with two rows of windows, on the first and second floor—the windowpanes glittered . . .

Did one of the windowpanes look at me with a human eye? People were still having their afternoon naps—judging by the silence—but it was quite possible that someone watched us from behind a windowpane—Leon? Roly-Poly? Katasia?—and it was conceivable that the one watching us was the same person who sneaked into our room, most likely during the morning hours, and gouged the line that created the arrow—what for? To poke fun at us? For a lark? To tell us something? No, it didn't make sense! Well alright, indeed, yet irrationality is a stick that has two ends, and Fuks and I at the other end of this irrationality moved and acted quite rationally—and I, engaged in such laborious maneuvers, had to bear in mind (if I didn't want to betray my ac-

tions) the possibility of a gaze lurking behind the painfully glistening and blinding windowpanes.

So I did bear it in mind. And Fuks's gaze, looking from above, was helpful to me. I moved about cautiously so as not to arouse suspicion, I raked the grass here and there, dropped the rake as if worn out by the heat, then imperceptibly moved it with my foot in the desired direction. These precautions increased the intensity of my collaboration with Fuks more than I had intended, I moved about almost like his slave. We finally determined the direction of the arrow—the line led all the way past the tool shed by the wall where the lot, partially littered with rubble and bricks, ended as an extension of the little garden. We moved slowly in that direction, diverging here and there as if busy studying flowers and herbs, talking, gesticulating from time to time, and carefully looking for something significant. From furrow to furrow, from twig to pebble, our gaze lowered, we were absorbed by the ground that unfolded before us—gray, yellowish, rusty-dark, boring, complex, sleepy, monotonous, barren, and hard. I wiped the sweat off my face. It was all a waste of time!

We came close to the wall . . . but here we stopped, helpless . . . it seemed quite difficult to conquer the remaining ten steps, we were too exposed! So far, our march through the little garden under the gaze of the windowpanes has been relatively easy—about fifty yards across level ground—and yet it became difficult because of a concealed difficulty that turned it almost into a climb—and now this same difficulty, brought about by the progressively steeper and more dizzying climb, increased sharply, as if we were reaching a summit. What an altitude! He squatted, pretending to look at a bug, and so, hunkering down and moving as though following the bug, he reached the wall; I veered to the

side, meandering here and there in order to join him in a round-about way. We were by the wall, at the far end, in the corner made by the shed.

The heat. Grasses, some rather luxuriant and swaying in the breeze, a beetle marches on the ground, bird droppings by the wall—the heat, yet now somehow different, and a different odor, of urine perhaps, I daydreamed of remoteness, it was all remote as if we had wandered for months, a place thousands of miles away, at the ends of the earth—suddenly a whiff of warm decay, there was a pile of garbage nearby, rains had created a seepage by the wall—stalks, stems, rubble—clods of dirt, pebbles—yellowish stuff . . . The heat again, yet different, unfamiliar . . . yes, yes . . . our reaching this corner that lived apart, referred us to that other, the darkly-cool thicket with its little pieces of cardboard and sheet metal—with the sparrow—as if by the power of distance, the one echoed back to the other—and our searching here seemed to come to life.

An onerous task . . . because, even if something were hiding here, to which the arrow, on the ceiling, in our room, was pointing, how would we find it in this entanglement, among weeds, among bits and pieces, in the litter, surpassing in number everything that could be happening on walls, on ceilings? An overwhelming abundance of connections, associations . . . How many sentences can one create out of the twenty-four letters of the alphabet? How many meanings can one glean from hundreds of weeds, clods of dirt, and other trifles? Heaps and multitudes gushed also from the boards of the shed, from the wall. I got bored. I straightened up and looked at the house and the garden—these huge, synthesized shapes, these enormous mastodons of the world of reality, were restoring order—I rested. Let's go back. I was

about to say this to Fuks but his face, stuck to one spot, stopped me short.

Slightly above our heads the cracked wall formed a recess consisting of what looked like three caves diminishing in size—inside one of the caves something was hanging. A stick. A small stick, about an inch long. It hung on a white thread, not much longer. It was hitched over a jagged brick.

Nothing more. We searched through everything in the area once again. Nothing. I turned around and looked at the house, glistening with its windowpanes. A whiff of freshness announced the evening, a breath that released leaves and grasses from their torpor in the heat. The leaves trembled on the young trees standing in a row, whitewashed and propped up with stakes.

We returned to our room.

Fuks collapsed on his bed.

“Say what you will, but the arrow has led us to something,” he said warily, and I, no less warily, muttered: “Like what?”

Yet it was hard to pretend that one didn’t know: a hanged sparrow—a hanged stick—the hanging of the stick from the wall repeating the hanging in the thicket—a grotesque result that suddenly increased the sparrow’s intensity (revealing the extent to which the sparrow had lodged within us, regardless of any pretense of our forgetting it). The stick and the sparrow, the sparrow reinforced by the stick! It was hard not to think that someone had led us to the stick to make us see the connection with the sparrow . . . but why? What for? As a joke? A prank? Someone had played a trick on us, made fools of us, to amuse himself . . . I felt uneasy, Fuks felt it too, and this prompted caution.

“I wouldn’t bet three cents that somebody isn’t pulling our leg.”

“Who?”

“One of them . . . someone who was there when I talked about the sparrow and how we identified the arrow on the ceiling in the dining room. The same person gouged the arrow in our room that leads to what? To the stick on the thread. A practical joke. A hoax.”

Yet it didn’t make sense. Who would want to play such elaborate jokes? What for? Who could have known that we’d discover the arrow and take such a deep interest in it? No—this concurrence, however small, between the stick on the thread and the sparrow on the wire—was pure chance. Granted, a stick on a thread, one doesn’t see this every day . . . yet the stick could have been hanging there for a thousand reasons unrelated to the sparrow, we had exaggerated its importance because it turned up at the end point of our search, as its outcome—when in fact it wasn’t any outcome at all, it was just a stick hanging on a thread . . . Pure chance then? Indeed . . . and yet one could sense in this series of events a propensity for congruity, something hazily linking them together—the hanged sparrow—the hanged chicken—the arrow in the dining room—the arrow in our room—the stick hanging on a thread—something was trying to break through and press toward meaning, as in charades, when letters begin to make their way toward forming a word. What word? Indeed, it seemed that everything wanted to act in the name of an idea . . . What idea?

What idea? Whose idea? If there was an idea, someone must have been behind it—but who? Who would have wanted to bother? But what if . . . what if Fuks had played a trick on me, I don’t know, out of boredom maybe . . . but no, why on earth Fuks . . . so much effort into a stupid caper . . . no, this didn’t make sense either. Pure chance then? I might have finally conceded that it was pure chance were it not for another abnormality that somehow had the tendency to hook onto this abnormality . . . were it not for

the strangeness of the stick backed by another strangeness that I preferred not to tell Fuks.

“Katasia.”

Obviously he too had thought of at least one of the faces of the Sphinx—he sat on his bed, head bowed, slowly swinging his dangling legs.

“What?” I asked.

“When someone has such an affected little beak . . .” he mused and added cunningly: “Go to your own for whatever turns you on!”\* He liked that and repeated with conviction: “I tell you, believe me, go to your own for whatever turns you on.”

Indeed . . . the lip and the stick appeared to be roughly related, if only because the lip was so eerie . . . but what then? Accept that Katasia was amusing herself with such subtle intrigues? Nonsense. And yet there was a kinship . . . the kinship, the associations opened before me like a dark cavern, dark yet pulling me in, sucking me in, because behind Katasia’s lip loomed Lena’s lips parting-and-closing, and I even felt a hot shock because the stick, in relating, after all, to the sparrow in the bushes, was as if the first sign (but oh, how pale and indistinct) in the objective world that confirmed, as it were, my hallucinations about Lena’s mouth “relating to” Katasia’s mouth—a faint, fantastic analogy but, after all, this same “relating to” came into play here, somehow establishing a pattern. Did Fuks know anything about this mouth connection or the association between Lena and Katasia—had he imagined such a thing—or was it solely and entirely my own? . . . Not for the world would I ask him . . . And not just because it was embarrass-

\*Adapted from a Polish expression, to which, in later chapters, Gombrowicz gives onanistic implications.

ing. Not for the world would I entrust this whole affair to his say or to his ogling eyes that had unnerved Drozdowski, his having problems with Drozdowski, just as I had mine with my parents, weakened me, stifled and tortured me—I didn't want him as a confidant or a buddy! No to that—"no" was generally the key word in our relationship. No and no. And yet, I became excited when he said "Katasia"—I was almost happy that someone else, not just I, had spotted the possibility that her lip had some connection with the stick and the bird.

"Katasia," he said slowly, reflecting, "Katasia . . ." But I could already see, after a brief euphoria, the whitish pallor of his gaze return, Drozdowski appeared on the horizon and, just for the sake of killing time, Fuks went on spinning his inept reasoning: "The minute I saw her . . . the problem with her mouth seemed . . . but . . . it could be either way . . . this way or that . . . What do you think?"





## chapter 3

**T**he evanescence, the intangibility of it all forced us to retreat, we returned to our work, I to my manuscript, he to his notes, but my distraction did not leave me, it mounted as the evening wore on, and the deepening darkness of those places, beyond the road, at the far end of the garden, penetrated the brightness of our lamp. Now another possibility occurred to us. Who could guarantee that, in addition to the arrow we had discovered, there weren't other signs hidden on the walls or elsewhere, in the combination of the stain above the sink and the peg that lay on top of the cupboard, for example, or in the scratches on the floor . . . For every sign deciphered by accident how many might go unnoticed, buried in the natural order of things? From time to time my gaze tore away from my papers and penetrated into the depths of the room (unbeknownst to Fuks, whose eyes also probably darted there). But I didn't worry about it very much, the fantastic volatility of the affair of the stick, constantly dispersing, would not tolerate anything that was not, just like it, ephemeral.

In any case, it was as if the surrounding reality was already contaminated by the possibility of meanings, and this pulled me away, constantly pulled me away, from everything else, yet it seemed comical that something like a stick could affect me to such a degree. Supper, as unavoidable as the moon—and again I had Lena across from me. Before going down for supper Fuks remarked, “It’s not worth telling them about this,” and he was right, discretion was advisable if we didn’t want to be taken for a couple of blockheads, lunatics. Supper then. Leon, eating his radishes, told us how years ago director Krysiński, his boss at the bank, taught him the art which the boss called “the knack” or “the reverse” that—according to him—any self-respecting aspirant to a high-ranking position in the civil service should have at his fingertips.

He imitated the deceased director Krysiński’s guttural, subdued voice: “Leon, take what I’m telling you to heart, remember, it’s all a matter of the knack, don’t you see? Take the situation where you must reprimand an office clerk, what should you do at the same time? Well, of course, my good man, pull out your cigarette case and treat him to a cigarette. That’s the reverse, mind you, the knack. If you need to be harsh or unpleasant to your client, smile, if not at him, then at least at his secretary. If you don’t have the knack he’ll close up on you too much and grow stiff. On the other hand, when you’re all sweetness with your client, slip in a crude word from time to time to jerk his leash and keep him from possibly stiffening up, because if he hardens and grows stiff on you, what then?” “Well, my dear fellows,” Leon recounted, a napkin tucked under his chin, his finger in the air, “one day the president of the bank breezes in for an inspection, I was already a division manager, I entertain him with respect and all due honors, but dur-

ing dinner I stumble and spill half a carafe of red wine on him. So he says: 'I see you're from director Krysiński's school!'"

Leon had a good laugh while he was cutting his radish, buttering it, salting it . . . he contemplated it for a moment before putting it in his mouth. "Hey! Oh! Oh, that bank, I could go on about it for a whole year, it's hard to express, to disentangle it, as I let my thoughts run on I don't know what to latch on to, there's so much, so much, so many days, hours. O God, O my God, O holy God, so many months, years, seconds, the director's secretary and I quarreled and fought like cat and dog, she was stupid, so help me merciful God, and a tattletale, once she ran to the director to tell him I had spat in the wastepaper basket, so I said to her, have you gone daft? . . . but what's the use, lots could be said, the why and wherefore of that spit, how, and what, as well as the way the conflict grew over months, years . . . who would remember it? What's the sense of babble-chattum replicatum, mmmme! . . . " He sank deep in thought, then added in a whisper: "And what blouse was she wearing at the time? Can't remember for the life of me . . . which one . . . The embroidered one? . . . " He interrupted his reverie and exclaimed vigorously to Roly-Poly: "Sweetie-pie, whatever it was, whatever happened, peek-a-boo Roly-coo!" "Your collar is crooked," Roly-Poly said, she set a jar aside and proceeded to fix his collar. "Thirty-seven years of conjugal life, if you please gentlemen," he continued, "take it or leave it, either way, sweetie pie, me and you, Roly-coo, on the River Vistula, on the blue Vistulie, once in the rain, oh boy, oh boy, well now, how many years has it been, hard candy candycoo, I bought some hard candy, then that janitor, the janitor, and the roof leaked, hey, hey, hey-ho, mommy-dearie, how many years has it been, in a little café, and what a café,

where, gone into thin air, gone-zo, bye-bye . . . I can't put it together again . . . Thirty-seven years! What of it . . . Hey, ho!" he brightened, then lapsed into silence, retreated into himself, stretched out his hand, reached for the bread and slowly rolled a little pellet, watched it, fell silent, hummed ti-ri-ri.

He sliced a piece of bread, cut off the edge to make it square, buttered it, spread the butter evenly, patted it with his knife, salted it, and pushed it into his mouth—he ate it. And he seemed to make sure he ate it. I looked at the arrow that had spread, spilled onto the ceiling, what kind of an arrow was that, how could we have perceived it as an arrow?! I also looked at the table, at the tablecloth, one must admit there is a limit to what can be seen—so then, on the tablecloth, Lena's hand resting, relaxed, small, coffee-colored, warmly-cool, growing by way of the wrist from the more distant whiteness of her shoulder (which I merely guessed at because I didn't venture that far with my gaze), and so, the hand was quiet and idle, but looking more closely one noticed a trembling, it was, for example, the trembling of the skin at the base of the ring finger, or the touching of two fingers, the middle and the ring finger—more like embryos of movement, yet sometimes becoming a real movement, the touching of the tablecloth with an index finger, the brushing of a fingernail against a fold . . . it was so far removed from Lena herself that I experienced it as a huge country full of internal movements, uncontrolled, subject no doubt to the laws of statistics . . . and among these movements there was one, a slow coiling of her palm, a lazy contracting of her fingers into her palm, a shy, snuggling movement . . . it had caught my eye earlier . . . and yet, was it so entirely unrelated to me? Who could know, but isn't it curious, that it generally happened at the very moment she lowered her eyes (I hardly saw those), this time

she did not raise them even once. Her husband's hand, that disgusting, eroto-nonero-to-erotic-nonero-toic abomination, that oddity burdened by obligatory eroticism "because of her," in connection with her little hand, yet his hand, after all, was decent, presentable . . . it was also here, on the tablecloth, nearby . . . And, of course, the coilings of her hand *might be* relating to his hand, but they also *might have* had an ever so faintly-slight connection with my watching from beneath downcast eyelids, although, one must admit, the likelihood of it was almost nil, one in a million, but the hypothesis, in all its frailty, was explosive, an igniting spark, like the breath that generates a tornado! . . . Because, who knows, she might actually hate this man whom I didn't want to observe closely because I was afraid, on whose periphery I was straying constantly and who was also unknowable, just as much as she was, after all . . . because, if it turned out, for instance, that she, by her husband's side, gives herself over to coilings under my gaze, so what, she might be like that, her little sin could be hitched to her innocence and meekness, which (the innocence and the meekness) would in this case become a higher-grade perversion. Oh, the wild power of feeble thought! Oh, the exploding breath! Supper went on in full swing, Ludwik remembered something, took out his notebook, Fuks prattled on, saying to Leon "she was a real shrew," or "so many years at the bank, good Lord!" and Leon, his brows knit, his face like a bespectacled bald-head, recounted in detail, what and how, and why "well, fancy that" . . . "no, because she didn't use the tissue-paper" . . . "there was a table-top" . . . and Fuks listened to avoid thinking about Drozdowski. I thought "and what if the coiling is for my sake," and I knew it was a useless thought, but, what's this, a twist, a jolt, a cataclysm, and with a sudden rush of her corpulence Roly-Poly dives under the table,

she's under the table, for a moment both the table and Roly-Poly go into a frenzy . . . what is it? It was the cat. She pulled it out from under the table, a mouse in its jaws.

After so much bubbling, spurting, and sputtering of words that had foamed in the violent cauldron of a cataract, the waters of our stay at the table, that river, humming, flowing, returned again to its channel, the cat was thrown out, again the table, the tablecloth, the lamp, glasses, Roly-Poly smoothes out some roughness in the tablecloth, Leon announces a forthcoming joke with his raised finger, Fuks stirs, the door opens, it's Katasia, Roly-Poly says to Lena "pass me the salad bowl," emptiness, eternity, nothingness, peace, I'm back to she loves him she hates him she's disenchanted enchanted happy unhappy, yet she might be all those things at once, but most likely she wasn't any of it for the simple reason that her little hand was too small, it was not a hand but a little hand, so what could she be with that little hand of hers, she couldn't be nothing, she was . . . she was . . . powerful in her effect, yet within herself she was nothing . . . confusion . . . confusion . . . confusion . . . matches, spectacles, a latch, a basket, an onion, cookies . . . cookies . . . so I should just look sideways, aside, askance, where the hands are, the sleeves, the shoulder, the neck, always on the periphery, face to face from time to time only, once in a blue moon, if there happens to be a pretext to look, under such circumstances, what can one know, what can one see, but, if I could look to my heart's content, not even then . . . ha, ha, ha, laughter, and I'm laughing, an anecdote, Leon's anecdote, Roly-Poly squeaks, Fuks is twitching . . . Leon, his finger raised, shouts "on my word of honor" . . . she is also laughing, but no more than just so, to adorn the general laughter with her laughter, everything with her is no more than just so . . . to adorn . . . but, even if I

could watch to my heart's content I wouldn't know, no, I wouldn't know, because between them there might be everything . . .

"I need a thread and a small stick."

Fuks addressed this to me. Now what?

I replied: "What for?"

"I forgot to bring a compass . . . damnit . . . and I have to draw a circle, I need it for my graph. If I had a thread and a small stick that would do it . . . A little stick and a piece of thread."

Ludwik said politely: "I have a compass upstairs, I'll be glad to get it for you," Fuks thanked him (the bottle and the cork, that piece of cork) yes, ah yes, I see, the slyboots, ah yes . . .

This was to secretly inform the possible joker that we had noticed the arrow on our ceiling and had discovered the stick on the thread. This was just in case—if anyone had indeed been amusing himself by arousing our interest with signs, let him know that we had read them . . . that we're awaiting further developments. A slim chance, but what did it cost him to drop these few words? I suddenly saw the family in the strange light of the following possibility—the perpetrator is among them—and at that moment the stick and the bird have emerged, the bird in the thicket and the stick at the far end of the garden, in its small grotto. Between the bird and the stick, I felt like I was suspended between the North and South Poles, and our whole gathering, at the table, under the lamp, appeared to me to be derived from that other configuration, "in relation to" the bird and the stick—which I was not against, because this eeriness paved the way for yet another eeriness that troubled me and yet fascinated me. O God! Considering the bird, considering the stick, perhaps finally I'll also find out what it is with the mouths. (Why? How? What an absurdity!)

Intensity of attention led to distraction . . . and yet I submitted



to it, it allowed me to be both here and somewhere else at the same time, it provided release . . . I greeted the ascent of Katasia's perversion, her circling here, there, closer, farther, above Lena, behind Lena, with a kind of dull internal "aach," like someone who had choked. Again, and even more so, the barely discernible, incidental disfigurement of those slightly damaged lips linked in my mind—oh, how impudently—with the simple and seductive closing of my *vis-à-vis*'s little mouth, and this combination, weakening or intensifying, depending on the configuration, led to contradictions such as licentious virginity, brutal timidity, wide-open closing, shameless shame, icy fervor, sober drunkenness . . .

"You don't understand, father," said Ludwik.

"What don't I understand? What?!"

"Organization."

"To hell with organization! What organization?!"

"The rational organization of society and of the world."

Leon attacked Ludwik across the table with his bald pate: "What do you want to organize? Organize how?"

"Scientifically."

"Scientifically!" with his eyes, spectacles, wrinkles, with his skull, Leon fired a round of pity at him, he lowered his voice to a whisper: "My good man," he asked confidentially, "have you ever put on your thinkie-cap? Organize! You're dreaming, cooking it up, you think you'll catch it all in your grip just like that dum dee dum, eh?" And he danced his predatory, clawing fingers in front of Ludwik, then he spread them and blew into them: "Fie! Paf! It's gone. Fy-eeee, pum, pum, pum, papapa, eeee . . . you understand . . . pua, pua, and what can you do, what's it to you, to someone like you, to you . . . It's gone. Run through your fingers. Gone."

He gazed at the salad bowl.

"I can't discuss this with you, father."

"No? Look at him! Why not?"

"Because you lack the background, father."

"What background?"

"Scientific."

"Scientifi-fic," Leon said slowly, "confide, if you please, confide to my snow-white virgin bosom how you are going to, with this scientific background of yours, or-ga-nize, how on earth, I ask you, how will you with this that there, in what manner, I ask you, with what and what for and whither and where, how will you, I ask you, with this and that, hither and thither, perchance to what end, how . . ." he got stuck, he stared, speechless, Ludwik put some potatoes on his plate, and this yanked Leon out of his dumbness? "What do you know?!" he burst out bitterly, "Studies! Studies! Me, I haven't studied, but for years I've thought . . . I'm still thinking and thinking . . . since I left the bank I do nothing but think, my head is bursting from thinking, and you, what's it to you, why should you bother . . . Let it go, let it go! . . ." But Ludwik was eating a piece of lettuce, Leon slumped, calm ensued, Katasia closed the cupboard, Fuks asked how many degrees is it, oh, it's hot, Roly-Poly pushed the dishes toward Katasia, the king of Sweden, the Scandinavian peninsula, then on to tuberculosis, injections. The table was now more spacious, just cups with coffee or tea, bread in a basket, and a few napkins already folded away—only one, Leon's, remained spread out. I drank tea, no one stirred, lethargy, everyone relaxed, their chairs slightly pushed back from the table, Ludwik reached for the newspaper, Roly-Poly froze. There were times when she would freeze, expressionless, in a state of total emptiness, a state that would end with a sudden awakening, like the splash of a stone thrown in the water. Leon had a wart on

his hand with a few hairs sticking out, he watched it, picked up a toothpick and twiddled the tiny hairs—watched again—then sprinkled a little salt from the tablecloth in between the hairs and looked. He smiled. Ti-ri-ri.

Lena's palm appeared on the tablecloth, next to her teacup. A great palaver of events, unending factoids such as the croaking of frogs in the pond, mosquitoes swarming, a swarming of stars, a cloud enclosing me, obliterating me, drifting with me, the ceiling with the archipelago and the peninsulas, with dots and damp patches all the way to the boring whiteness of the window shade . . . an abundance of details, which may have related to Fuks's and my clods of dirt, our little sticks, etc. . . . and maybe it was all somehow connected with Leon's trivialities . . . I don't know, perhaps I only thought like that because I was inclined to trivialities . . . fragmented . . . oh, I was so fragmented! . . .

Katasia moved the ashtray toward Lena.

Something hit me in the mouth sliding out cold shapeless smack into mouth get out beat it the wire mesh with the leg twisted contorted and silence dead silence cavern nothing . . . and out of chaos, out of all the churning (after Katasia had left) the mouth constellation appears, shining irrepressibly, glittering. And beyond all doubt: mouth is relating to mouth!

I lowered my eyes, again I saw only the little hand on the tablecloth, doubly-mouthed doubly-lipped one way or the other two-fold innocently defiled pure slippery I stared at the little hand and waited, suddenly the table swarmed with hands, what's happening, Leon's little hand, Fuks's little hand, Roly-Poly's hands, Ludwik's hands, so many hands in the air . . . it's a wasp! A wasp flew into the room. Flew out. The hands calmed down. Again—a wave

receding, calm returns, I'm wondering about those hands, what's this, Leon addressed Lena: "Oh, my manifold adventure."

"Oh, my manifold adventure, give your daddy igniting phosphorus" (matches). "Oh, my manifold adventure," he sometimes called her, or "bambi-pambi," or "oh, rapture-go-slowly," or something else again. Roly-Poly brews herb tea, Ludwik reads, Fuks finishes his tea, Ludwik folds the newspaper, Leon gazes, I thought, how so, how is it, did the hands swarm, rise in an uproar, because of the wasp, or because of the hand on the table . . . because, strictly speaking, there was no doubt that the hands had swarmed on account of the wasp . . . but who could guarantee that the wasp was not merely a pretext for the hands rising in connection with her little hand . . . A double meaning . . . and this doubling was perhaps connected (who could tell?) with the Katasia-Lena doubling of mouths . . . with the sparrow-stick doubling . . . I wandered about. I strolled on the periphery. In the light of the lamp there was the darkness of the bushes beyond the road. To sleep. The cork on the bottle. The piece of cork stuck to the neck of the bottle, it emerges and suggests . . .



## chapter 4

**T**he next fine day arrived distracted, dry and glistening, shimmering, it was impossible to concentrate, out of the blueness of the sky rolled little round clouds, plump and immaculate. I immersed myself in my manuscript because, after yesterday's excesses, an inner austerity had taken hold of me, asceticism, a distaste for quirkiness. Should I go to the stick? To see if something new has happened, especially after Fuks's discrete hint last night at supper that we had discovered the stick and the thread? . . . But distaste for this affair, grotesque like an aborted fetus, held me back. I ground away at my work, my head between my hands, anyway I knew that Fuks would go to the stick in my stead, even though he made no attempt to speak to me about it—we had exhausted the topic—yet I knew that, out of his inner emptiness, he'd go there, to the wall. I concentrated on my manuscript while he wandered about the room, finally he left. And he came back, we ate breakfast in our room as usual (Katasia brought it to us), but he said nothing . . .

after napping until almost four in the afternoon, he finally spoke from his bed: "Come, I'll show you something."

I didn't answer—I wanted to humiliate him—no response was the most painful response. Humiliated, he kept quiet, he didn't dare to insist, but minutes passed, I began to shave, finally I asked: "Is there anything new?" He replied: "Yes and no." When I finished shaving he said: "So, come on, I'll show you." We went out, taking the usual precautions in relation to the house with its window-panes watching, and we reached the stick. There was a waft of air from the heated wall and the smell of urine or apples, there was a drain nearby, yellow blades of grass . . . distance, extreme reaches, a separate life in hot silence, a buzzing. The stick was there, as we had left it, it hung on the thread.

"Look closely at this," he pointed toward a pile of garbage in the open door of the shed, "do you see anything?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Absolutely nothing?"

"Nothing."

He stood in front of me, a tedium to us both.

"Look at this whiffletree."

"What?"

"Did you notice it yesterday?"

"Maybe."

"Was it lying in exactly the same position? Hasn't that changed since yesterday?"

He was tiresome—and he knew it, no illusions—he emanated the fatalism of a man who is bound to be a bore, he stood by the

wall, all this was hollow in the extreme, futile. He insisted: “Try to remember . . .” but I knew that he insisted out of boredom, and this bored me as well. A yellow ant marched along the broken whiffletree. On top of the wall the stems of weeds were outlined clearly against the sky, I didn’t remember it, how was I to remember, maybe the whiffletree had changed its position, maybe it hadn’t changed its position . . . A yellow flower.

He would not accept defeat. He stood over me. It was unpleasant because in this remote place the emptiness of our boredom met with the emptiness of these supposed signs, with evidence that wasn’t evidence, with this total nonsense—two emptinesses and the two of us caught between them. I yawned. He said:

“Look closely, where is the whiffletree pointing?”

“Where?”

“To Katasia’s little room.”

Yes. The whiffletree aimed straight at her little room by the kitchen, in the addition, next to the house.

“Aa . . .”

“Exactly. If the whiffletree has not been touched, then it’s nothing, then it has no meaning. But if it has been touched, it’s in order to direct us to Katasia . . . It’s someone, mind you, who got wise to it when I hinted at the stick and the thread yesterday at supper, and realizing that we were on the trail, comes here at night and points the whiffletree to Katasia’s room. It’s like a new arrow. He knew that we’d come again to see if there’s a new sign.”

“But how do you know that the whiffletree was touched?”

“I’m not sure. But that’s how it seems to me. There is a track where the wood scraps have been moved, as if the whiffletree lay in a different position before . . . And look at the three pebbles . . .



and the three sticks . . . and the three blades of grass that are pulled out . . . and the three buttons, from a saddle probably . . . Don't you see anything?"

"See what?"

"They seem to form triangles pointing at the whiffletree, as if someone had wanted to draw our attention to the whiffletree . . . they seem to create, don't you think, a kind of rhyme directed at the whiffletree. It's . . . perhaps . . . what do you think?"

I took my eyes off the yellow ant that appeared on and off between the leather straps, rushing to the left, to the right, back and forth, I hardly listened to Fuks, in one ear and out the other, how idiotic, misery, abject misery, humiliation, this bilious state of ours, the nasty taste of it, the nonsense, all floating above the pile of rubble and other odds and ends, by the wall, as well as his carrot mug, bug-eyed and disdained. I again started to explain—"who would bother, who would make up such insignificant signs, almost invisible, who would figure that we'd catch on to the change in the whiffletree's direction . . . no one with all his marbles . . ." But he interrupted me: "Who says it's someone with all his marbles? Another thing: how do you know how many signs he's making up? Perhaps we've discovered only one of many . . ." With a wave of his arm he encompassed the garden and the house: "Perhaps the place is swarming with signs . . ."

We stood there—a clod of dirt, a cobweb—and we knew that we wouldn't leave this alone. What else did we have going? I took a piece of brick in my hand, I looked at it, set it back and said: "Well then? Shall we follow the line of the whiffletree?"

He laughed self-consciously.

"Can't be helped. You understand, don't you. For the sake of peace. Tomorrow is Sunday. It's her day off. We'll have to inspect

her room, we'll see if there is anything to be seen . . . And if not, it will be the end of all this bother!"

I fixed my eyes on the rubble, so did he—as if I wanted to read from it a slight but swinish, sulky slipaway of a lip and, indeed, it seemed that the rubble, the whiffletree of the cart, the leather straps, the garbage began to pulsate with an atmosphere of roving slipperiness, with a profile of disfigurement . . . together with the ashtray, with the wire net of the bed, with the closing and parting of lips . . . and it all vibrated, seethed, reaching Lena, which terrified me because, I wondered, how on earth were we going to act again and, by acting, bring about . . . we'll bring this whiffletree into action, then I'll get at the mouth by way of the rubble—which thrilled me—because, I thought, aha, now we'll begin to act, and by our action we'll penetrate this riddle, indeed, yes, yes, let's work our way into Katasia's little room and search it, look, check on it! Check! Oh, an all-clarifying action! And, oh, an obscuring action, in the dead of night, leading into a chimera!

And so, in spite of everything, I felt better—our return along the gravel path was like the return of two detectives—working on our detailed plans allowed me to survive with honor until the next day. Supper passed peacefully, my field of vision was increasingly confined to the tablecloth, I found it increasingly difficult to look at people, I watched the tablecloth where Lena's little hand lay . . . quieter today, without obvious quivering, (yet this could have actually been proof that she was the one who had set up the whiffletree!) . . . and the other hands, Leon's hand for instance, sluggish, or Ludwik's erotic-nonerotic hand, and Roly-Poly's hand like a potato atop a beetroot, her little fist sticking out of her patulous old crone's arm and shoulder, evoking a silently mounting unpleasantness . . . becoming even more unpleasant in the vicinity of

the elbow, where a chapped redness eventually continued as bluish-gray and violet bays, leading into other recesses. Complex, wearisome configurations of hands, similar to the configurations on the ceiling, on the walls . . . everywhere . . . Leon's hand stopped drumming, he lifted a finger of his left hand with two fingers of his right hand and held it thus, looking at it with attention that froze into a dreamy smile. The conversation of course, high above, above the hands, went on unceasingly, but only this and that reached me, they touched on various subjects, and at one point Ludwik asked what do you think, father, imagine, ten soldiers marching Indian file, what do you think, father, how long would it take to exhaust all the possible configurations of the soldiers in file by moving, for example, the third man to the place of the first, and so on . . . assuming that we make one change each day? Leon pondered: three monthies? Ludwik said:

"Ten thousand years. It's been calculated."

"Oh, Ludwik," Leon said, "oh, Ludwik . . . Ludwik . . ." He fell silent and sat bristling. It seemed that Ludwik's word "configuration" was in some way tied to the "configurations" that had occurred to me, it seemed like a peculiar coincidence that he mentioned configurations of soldiers, just as I was drowning in so many configurations myself—wasn't it almost like putting my own anxieties into words?—oh, the "almost," how many times already had this "almost" made my life miserable—yet one also has to take into account the fact that I was struck by the story about the soldiers because it connected with my own anxieties, and therefore I singled it out from many other things which they also talked about. And so it was this coincidence that was partially (oh, only partially!) of my own doing—and that's exactly what was so difficult, awful, misleading, I could never know to what degree I

was the perpetrator, configuring the configurations around me, oh, the criminal keeps returning to the scene of the crime! When one considers what a great number of sounds, forms reach us at every moment of our existence . . . the swarm, the roar, the river . . . nothing is easier than to configure! Configure! For a split second this word took me by surprise like a wild beast in a dark forest, but it soon sank into the hurly-burly of the seven people sitting here, talking, eating, supper going on, Katasia handed Lena the ashtray . . .

“We’ll have to explain everything, clarify, get to the bottom of it . . .” but I didn’t think inspection of the little room would yield anything, our project for tomorrow would merely help us cope with the strange dependence of mouth on mouth, city on city, star on star . . . and, in the final analysis, what’s so strange about mouth returning to mouth, when all the time, unceasingly, one thing was returning me to another, one thing lurked behind another, behind Ludwik’s hand was Lena’s hand, behind a cup a glass, behind the streak on the ceiling an island, the world was indeed a kind of screen and did not manifest itself other than by passing me on and on—I was just the bouncing ball that objects played with!

Suddenly something tapped.

The sound of someone tapping a stick against a stick—a brief, dry sound. Not loud—even though it was a distinct sound, so distinct that it rose above all the other sounds. Did someone tap? Did something tap? I went numb. Something like “this is the beginning” flashed through my head, I was petrified, get on with it, you, the apparition, crawl out! . . . But the noise was lost in time, nothing happened, perhaps it was the creak of one of the chairs . . . nothing important . . .

Nothing important. Next day, Sunday, introduced turmoil into the flow of our life, although today, like any other day, Kataria woke me and stood over me for a moment out of sheer friendliness, but it was Mrs. Wojtys herself who took care of cleaning our room and, while rolling around with her dustcloth, recounted how in Drohobycz they had a “lovely first floor in a villa, with amenities,” she used to rent rooms with board, or without, then six years in Pułtusk “in a comfortable apartment on the third floor,” but besides regular tenants she often had as many as six boarders “from the city” on her hands, usually older people, with assorted ailments, so, a soft pap for this one, soup for another, nothing acidic for yet another, until one day I told myself, no, no more of this, enough, I can’t do it, and I said this to my old fogies, you should have seen their despair, oh, dear lady, who will take care of us, so I replied: can’t you see, I put too much heart into this, I wear myself down to the bone, why do it, why should I be killing myself, and especially since I’ve had to look after Leon all my life, you have no idea, this and that, always something, I just don’t know how this man would have managed without me, coffee in bed all his life, all his life, fortunately that’s how I am, I hate to be idle, from morning ’til night, from night ’til morning, but also enjoying ourselves, visiting, entertaining guests, you know, Leon’s aunt is married to count Koziembrodzki, if you please, and when I married Leon his family stuck up their noses, even Leon himself was so scared of his auntie, the countess, that he didn’t introduce me to her for two years, so I say, Leon, don’t you be scared, I’ll show this auntie of yours a thing or two, and one day I read in the newspaper there’s a charity ball, and that the countess Koziembrodzka is on the organizing committee, I don’t tell Leon anything, I just say Leon, we’ll go to the ball, well, I tell you, for

about two weeks I was secretly getting ready, two seamstresses, a hairdresser, massages, I even had a pedicure to give myself courage, I borrowed Tela's jewelry, Leon was dumbstruck when he saw me, I'm calm, we walk into the ballroom, music, I take Leon under the arm and we head straight for the countess and, imagine, she turned her back on us! She insulted me! So I say to Leon, Leon your aunt is a fathead, and I spat on the floor, while he, you know, not a word, he's like that, talk, talk, but when it comes to doing something, he does nothing, he beats around the bush, he wriggles out, but later, when we lived in Kielce, I made preserves, lots of neighbors visited us, they ordered my preserves months in advance, she fell silent, she went on dusting as if she hadn't said anything, until Fuks asked:

"Then what?"

So then she said that one of her tenants in Pułtusk was a consumptive and I had to serve him cream three times a day "to the point that it was disgusting" . . . and she left. What did it all mean? What was the sense of it? What was behind it? And the glass tumbler? Why did I notice the tumbler yesterday, in the living room, by the window, on the table, together with two spools of thread—why did I look at it as I passed by—was it worth the attention—should I go down, look again, check? Fuks too must have been checking up on things in secret, studying, looking around, pondering, he too was extremely scattered—stupidly scattered. Fuks, yes . . . but he didn't have even one hundredth of the reasons I had . . .

Lena was circulating like blood in this nonsense!

I couldn't resist the impression that Lena was behind it all, striving toward me, straining to force her way, shyly, secretly . . . I could almost see her: straying about the house, drawing on ceil-

ings, setting up the whiffletree, hanging the stick, making figures out of objects, she darts along the walls, around corners . . . Lena . . . Lena . . . Forcing her way to me . . . maybe even pleading for help! Nonsense! Yes, nonsense, but on the other hand, couldn't those two anomalies—that "union" of mouths and those signs—have anything in common? Nonsense! Yes, nonsense, but could something within me as intense as the contamination of Lena by Katasia's lips be just my imagination? We had supper alone with Roly-Poly because Lena went with her husband to visit their acquaintances, Leon was out playing bridge, it was Sunday, Katasia's day off, she had left right after lunch.

Supper, seasoned with Roly-Poly's incessant voice—when Leon wasn't around, chattering beset her—on she went, that the tenants, that with the tenants, that her whole life, you gentlemen have no idea, a meal for this one, sheets for that one, enema for yet another, this one wants a space heater, goes on about a space heater . . . I hardly listened, something about "with whores" . . . "a bottle behind the bed, he's almost dying, yet the bottles" . . . "I tell him, whims, whims, but you know where your scarf is" . . . "I fought tooth and nail, worked myself to the bone, I'm not made of stone" . . . "Oh, the rabble, so help me God" . . . "it's a holy terror, that human filth, dear Jesus" . . . her beady eyes followed our food consumption, her bust resting on the table, and on her elbow the skin peeling off and passing into pink violet, just as on the ceiling where the pustulation of the central bay passed into a pale, yellowish rash . . . "If it weren't for me, they'd all be dead" . . . "often in the night when he groaned" . . . "so they transferred Leon, and we rented" . . . She was like the ceiling, behind her ear she had what looked like a hardened blister, and then a forest began, her hair, first there seemed to be two or three rings of hair, then the

forest, grayish-black, thick, rolling up, curled, here and there in locks, here and there in tufts, then smooth again, falling down, the skin on her nape suddenly very delicate, white, then nearby a scratch as if made by a fingernail, and a reddened area, then something like a blemish above her shoulder, while at the edge of the blouse a staleness began, an area of wear and tear that disappeared under the blouse, and there, under the blouse, continued farther down to various warts, adventures . . . She was like the ceiling . . . “When we lived in Drohobycz” . . . “tonsillitis, then rheumatism, stones in the liver” . . . She was, like the ceiling, beyond grasp, inexhaustible, infinite in its islands, archipelagos, lands . . . After supper we waited until she went to bed and, around ten o’clock, we went into action.

What phenomena would be unleashed by our action?

Forcing our way into Katasia’s room presented no difficulties, we knew she always left a key by her window that was overgrown with ivy. The difficulty was that we had no assurance that the person who was leading us by the nose—assuming that someone was leading us by the nose—did not lie in ambush spying on us from a hiding place . . . someone who could even raise hell for all we knew? We spent a lot of time wandering about near the kitchen to see if anyone was watching us—but the house, the windows, the little garden, lay peacefully in the night over which swept thick, tousled, clouds, and from behind them the crescent moon sailed out, racing. Dogs chased each other among the little trees. We were afraid of ridicule. Fuks showed me a small box that he held in his hand.

“What is it?”

“A frog. It’s alive. I caught it today.”

“What’s that all about?”



“If anyone catches us, we can say that we sneaked into her room to put the frog in her bed . . . As a joke!”

His face, rebuffed by Drozdowski, was white-carroty-fish-like. He had a frog, all right, that was clever! And the frog, one had to admit, was not out of place, its slipperiness circling round Katarisia’s slipperiness . . . I was astonished, even worried by his coming up with the frog . . . and even more so because the frog was not all that far removed from the sparrow—the sparrow and the frog—the frog and the sparrow—was something hiding behind this? Did it mean anything? Fuks said:

“Let’s go and see what’s happening with the sparrow. We have to wait a while anyway.”

We went. Out the door, in the bushes, we encountered the familiar darkness, the familiar smell, we approached the familiar place, but our gaze beat in vain against the blackness, or rather against a multitude of various blacknesses effacing everything—there were black caverns caving in, next to other holes, spheres, layers, poisoned by semi-existence, and this flowed together into a kind of concoction that had a restraining, opposing effect. I had a flashlight, but I wasn’t free to use it. The sparrow had to be ahead of us, by two paces, we knew where, but we couldn’t reach it with our gaze that was being devoured by something negating it, by darkness. Finally . . . the bird loomed as if it were the center of a configuration, a thickening no bigger than a pear . . . it hung . . .

“Here it is.”

In the silent darkness the frog in the box announced itself . . . not that it made a sound, yet its existence, excited by the sparrow’s existence, made itself known. We were with the frog . . . it was here, with us, in the presence of the sparrow, the sparrow was its

crony in the frog-sparrow realm, and it brought the slippery lip slipaway to me . . . and the trio of sparrow-frog-our-little-Katasia pushed me into her mouth cavern, turning the black cavern of the bushes into her gaping mug, equipped with the affected frolic of her lip . . . leaping aside. Lust. Swinish business. I stood motionless, Fuks was already retreating from the bushes, “nothing new,” he whispered, and, when we came out onto the road, the night with its sky, its moon, with its plenitude of silver-edged clouds, blazed forth. To action! A frantic wish for action, for a cleansing wind, beat within me, I was ready to attack anything!

Yet this action of ours was pitiful, God be merciful—two conspirators with a frog, following the line of a whiffletree. Once more we swept the scene with our gaze: the house and the faintly visible trunks of the little trees, white with lime, the huge trees growing densely in the thicket, the spreading expanse of the little garden—I felt for the key at the window, in the ivy, and after inserting it into the lock I gently lifted the door on its hinges so it wouldn’t creak. At this time the frog in the box ceased to be important, it moved to the background. Instead, when the door opened, the cavern of the small, low room that gave off a bitter, oppressive odor, like that of a laundry room, or bread, or herbs, that cavern of Katasia’s excited me, the botched-up mouth sucked all over me, sucking me, and I had to be careful not to let Fuks catch on to the agitation in my breathing.

He went in with the flashlight and the frog, while I remained in the partly open door to stand watch.

The dimmed light of the flashlight, muted by a handkerchief, slid over the bed, the wardrobe, the little table, the wastepaper basket, the shelf, revealing in turn other places, corners, fragments,

undergarments, odds and ends of clothes, a broken comb, a small mirror, a plate with coins, gray soap, objects and objects emerging one after another, as in a movie, while outside clouds followed clouds—at the door I was between the two processions: of objects and of clouds. And even though each one of the objects in the little room was hers, Katasia's, they acquired the ability to express her only when taken as a whole, creating a substitute for her presence, a second presence that I was violating through Fuks—with his flashlight—while I was standing to one side, on watch. Violating slowly. The spot of light moving, jumping aside, stopped momentarily on something, as if in meditation, to then rummage again, ferret, grope in stubborn search for swinishness—that's what we looked for, that's what we sniffed for. Oh, swinish, swinish business! Meanwhile the frog was in the box on the table where he had left it.

Servile inferiority, born of a dirty and jagged comb, of a greasy mirror, of a threadbare, damp towel—a servant's chattels, already urban, yet still a villager's, simple in nature, we pawed through them to gain access to the slippery, twirled-up sinfulness that was lurking here, in this mouth-like cavern, yet hiding its every trace . . . We groped for depravity, perversity, for villainy. It had to be here somewhere! Suddenly the flashlight came upon a large photograph in a corner past the wardrobe, and out of the frame emerged Katasia . . . with her mouth unblemished! Imagine that!

Pure guileless mouth, good-hearted country mouth!

On a much younger, rounder face! Katasia, all decked out, with a festive décolletage, on a bench under a palm tree behind which one could see the bow of a boat, a stout foreman with a mustache in a stiff collar holding Katasia by her little hand . . . Katasia smiling pleasantly . . .

When, waking at night, we could swear that the window is on the right, the door behind our head, one single orienting sign, such as the light from the window or the murmur of the clock, is enough for everything to fall into place in our heads, all at once and in a definitive way, just so. What now? Reality intruded with lightning speed—everything returned to normal, as if called to order. Katasia: a respectable housekeeper who had injured her lip in a car accident; we: a couple of lunatics . . .

Dejected, I looked at Fuks. In spite of this he kept on searching, the flashlight ferreted again, bills on the table, stockings, holy pictures, Christ and the Mother of God with a bouquet—but what of this search? He was merely making the best of it.

“Get ready,” I whispered. “Let’s go.”

All possibility of swinish lust vanished from the illuminated objects, and instead, the illuminating itself became swinish—the groping, the sniffing around, took on a suicidal character—the two of us in this little room were like two lascivious apes. He reciprocated my gaze with a haggard smile and continued to wander over the room with the flashlight, it was obvious that his head was totally empty, nothing there, nothing, nothing, like someone who realizes that he has lost everything he was carrying, and yet continues on his way . . . and his failure with Drozdowski chummed up with this failure, it all flowed together into one big flop . . . with an obscene, whorehouse smile he peeped into Katasia’s ribbons, cotton-wool, dirty stockings, shelves, her little curtains, from the shadow where I stood I saw how he did it . . . just for revenge and for the hell of it, with his own lasciviousness retaliating for the fact that she had ceased to be lascivious. Pawing around, the spot of light dancing round a comb, the heel of a shoe . . . But all for nothing! In vain! All this made no sense any

more, it slowly fell apart like a parcel after the string is cut, objects grew indifferent, our sensuality was dying. And the threatening moment approached when one wouldn't know what to do.

Then I noticed something.

This something could have been nothing, but it also might not be nothing. Most likely not important . . . but in any case . . .

As a matter of fact, he shone the light on a needle that was peculiar because it was driven into the tabletop.

This would not have been worthy of attention were it not that I had already noticed something even stranger, namely the nib of a pen driven into a lemon rind. So, after he fingered the needle that had been driven in, I took his hand and led the flashlight to the nib—the sole purpose being to restore to our presence here the semblance of an investigation.

But then the flashlight began to move briskly and after a moment found something—namely a nail file on top of the chest of drawers. The nail file was driven into a little cardboard box. I had not noticed the nail file before, the flashlight showed it to me as if asking, “what do you think?”

The nail file—the nib—the needle . . . the flashlight was now like a dog that had caught a scent, it jumped from object to object, and we discovered two more “driven-ins”: two safety pins driven into a cardboard. Not much. Not much, and yet, wretched as we were, this gave new direction to our action, the flashlight worked jumping, examining . . . and here was something else . . . a nail driven into the wall, strange in its location, about an inch above the floor. Yet the strangeness of the nail wasn't enough in itself, it was our illuminating the nail that was, to some extent, an abuse on our part . . . There was nothing else . . . nothing . . . we still searched, but our search was coming to an end, in the sultry

cavern of the room decay was setting in . . . finally the flashlight stopped . . . what next?

He opened the door, we began to retreat. Before the actual departure he briefly shone the light straight into Katasia's mouth. Leaning against the recess of the window I felt a hammer under my hand and I whispered "a hammer," perhaps because the hammer was connected to the nail driven into the wall. No matter. Let's go. We closed the door, returned the key to its place, "the wind is really blowing way up there"—he whispered beneath the dome of speeding clouds, he, the ne'er-do-well, the rebuffed one, the irritating one, what's he to me, it's my own fault, never mind, the house stood immobile before us, beyond the road tall spruces stood like posts, small trees stood in the little garden, it reminded me of a dance when the music suddenly stops and all the couples stand dumbstruck, it was all so stupid.

Now what? Go back and go to sleep? Some kind of depletion was encircling me, a weakening of everything. I didn't feel a thing.

He turned to me to say something, when suddenly a pounding—forceful and resonant, shattered the calm!

I went numb—it came from behind the house, from the direction of the road, the furious blows came from there, someone was pounding! Like with a hammer! Furious blows with a hammer, heavy, iron blows, pounding blow after blow, bang, bang, fiercely, someone pounding with all their might! The din of iron in the noiseless night was astounding, almost out of this world . . . Was it against us? We took cover by the wall as if those blows, incompatible with everything that surrounded us, must have been aimed at us.

The pounding did not cease. I looked around the corner and caught Fuks by the sleeve. There was Mrs. Roly-Poly.

Mrs. Roly-Poly! In a robe with wide sleeves, and within those wide-swept sleeves, she was panting and pounding, lifting a hammer, or an axe, pounding into the trunk of a tree, stark raving mad. Driving in? What was she driving in? Why this driving-in, desperate and furious . . . that . . . that we had left in Katasia's little room . . . and now it was mightily raging here, and the roar of iron reigned!

The small hammer that I touched with my elbow as we were leaving the little room transformed itself into this hammer, into the pins, the needles, the pen nibs, and into the driven-in nails, reaching their utmost in this sudden unleashing. As soon as I thought of the connection, I pushed away the absurd thought, off with it, but at the same moment another driving-in, something like a crash . . . resounded from inside the house . . . From somewhere above, from the second floor, but faster and more frequent, accompanying the other blows, corroborating the driving-in and bursting my brain, panic writhed in the night, a frenzy, it was like an earthquake! Was it coming from Lena's room? I broke away from Fuks and rushed into the house, I hurried upstairs . . . was it Lena?

But, as I ran up the stairs, suddenly everything became dumb-struck—and I, already on the second floor, stood still, panting, because the din that drove me on had ceased. Silence. I even had a totally calm thought, why not calm down and simply go back to our room. But Lena's door, the third one in the hallway, was in front of me, while within me the banging, the driving-in were still happening, the din, the hammer, the small hammer, the needles, nails, the driving-in, the driving-in, oh, to bang through to Lena, to keep banging through to her . . . therefore, throwing myself at her door I began to strike it, to pound it with my fists! With all my might!

Silence.

It flashed through my head that if they open the door, I'll exclaim "thieves!" to somehow justify myself. Yet nothing—everything had become quiet, I could hear nothing, nothing, nothing, I retreated silently and quickly, I went downstairs. But downstairs all was quiet too. Emptiness. Not a living soul. No Fuks, no Roly-Poly. The lack of response from Lena's room was easily explained, they weren't there, they hadn't yet returned from their visit, the ruckus hadn't come from there—but where has Fuks gone? Where was Roly-Poly? I went round the house, close to the wall so that no one could see me from the windows—the frenzy had dissipated without a trace, only the trees remained, only the paths, the gravel beneath the racing moon, nothing more. Where was Fuks? I felt like crying, I was close to sitting down and crying.

Suddenly I see, on the second floor, light shining from a window—in Lena and Ludwik's room.

I see, so they are there, they heard my banging! Why didn't they open the door? What am I to do? Again I had nothing to do, nothing, I was unemployed. What then? What? Go to our room, undress, go to sleep? Or lie in ambush somewhere? What? What? Cry? Their window on the second floor was not shaded, light shone from it . . . and . . . and . . . just across from it, behind the fence, stood a dense, wide-spreading spruce, if I climbed it, I could look in . . . A wild idea, but its wildness was in keeping with the wildness that had just come to an end . . . what else was there for me to do?

The uproar, the confusion that had just taken place made such an idea possible, it was facing me, just like this tree, nothing else was facing me. I went onto the road, forced my way to the trunk of the spruce and began laboriously climbing that coarse and



prickly monster. Oh, to bang my way through to Lena! To reach Lena . . . the residue of that other banging rattled within me, and again I strove toward it . . . all the rest, Katasia's room, her photo, the pins, Roly-Poly's banging, everything receded before my main and only purpose of banging through to Lena. I climbed carefully, from branch to branch, higher and higher.

It was not easy, it took a long time, my curiosity was becoming feverish: to see her, to see her—to see her with him—what will I see? . . . After that thumping, pounding—what will I see? My recent trembling in front of her door trembled on within me, furiously. What will I see? I had already swept my eyes over the ceiling, the upper part of the wall, and the lamp.

Finally I saw.

I was dumbstruck.

He was showing her a kettle.

A kettle.

She sat on a small chair, by the table, with a bath towel thrown over her back like a shawl. He stood in his vest, held the kettle in his hand and was showing it to her. She was looking at the kettle. Saying something. He was talking.

The kettle.

I had been ready for anything. But not for the kettle. One must understand what is the drop that makes the cup overflow. What is it that's "too much." There is something like an excess of reality, its swelling beyond endurance. After so many objects that I couldn't even enumerate, after the needles, frogs, sparrow, stick, whiffle-tree, pen nib, leather, cardboard, et cetera, chimney, cork, scratch, drainpipe, hand, pellets, etc. etc., clods of dirt, wire mesh, wire, bed, pebbles, toothpick, chicken, warts, bays, islands, needle, and so on and so on and on, to the point of tedium, to excess, and now

this kettle popping up like a Jack-in-the-box, without rhyme or reason, on its own, *gratis*, a luxury of disorder, a splendor of chaos. Enough is enough. My throat tightened. I won't be able to swallow all this. I won't be able to handle it. Enough. Turn back. Go home.

She took off the towel. She had no blouse. Nakedness assailed me from her breasts, her shoulders. Bending her nudity she began to pull down her stockings, the husband spoke again, she answered, she took off a stocking, he placed his foot on a chair and was unlacing his shoe. I delayed my retreat, I thought that now I would find out what she's like, what she's like with him when naked, is she vile, mean, dirty, slippery, sensual, sacred, tender, pure, faithful, fresh, attractive, perhaps a coquette? Perhaps just easy? Or profound? Perhaps just obstinate, or disillusioned, bored, indifferent, passionate, cunning, evil, angelic, timid, impudent, I'll finally see! Then her thighs showed, once, twice, I'll soon know, I'll finally find out, finally something will reveal itself to me . . .

The kettle.

He picked it up, moved it from the table to the floor and went to the door.

The light went out.

I looked closely but saw nothing, with my unseeing gaze piercing the darkness of the cavern I kept looking, what could they be doing? What were they doing? And how were they doing it? At this moment anything could be happening there. There was no gesture, no touch, that would not be possible, the darkness was truly inscrutable, she writhed or she didn't writhe, or she was embarrassed, or she loved, or else there was nothing, or something entirely different, or it was baseness, or horror, I'll never find out anything. I began to climb down and, letting myself down slowly, I thought that even if she were a child with very blue eyes she

could be a monster as well—blue-eyed and childish. So what does one know?

I will never know anything about her.

I jumped to the ground, brushed myself off, slowly walked toward the house, in the sky all was rush and speed, entire herds sped on, disheveled, the whiteness of their luminous edges, the blackness of their nuclei, everything sped on below the moon that also raced, swam out, glided, dimmed, then emerged immaculate, the heavens were embraced by two contradictory motions, speeding and calm—and I, walking on, wondered whether to throw everything out the window, whether to get rid of the entire ballast and say “I pass,” because, finally, Katasia’s lip, as was evident from the photograph, was a purely mechanical blemish. So why did I need this?

And on top of it all, the kettle . . .

Why did I need the association of the mouths—her mouth with Katasia’s? I won’t do it anymore. I’ll leave it alone.

I was reaching the porch. Lena’s cat, Davie, sat on the banister and, on seeing me, it stood up and stretched itself so that I would tickle it. I caught the cat tightly by the throat, I began to strangle it—what am I doing—flashed through me like lightning, but then I thought: too bad, it’s too late, I tightened my fingers with all my might. I strangled it. It hung limp.

What now, what next, I was on the porch with a strangled cat in my hands, something had to be done with the cat, lay it down somewhere, hide it? However, I had no idea where. Perhaps bury it? Yet who’d be burying anything at night!? Throw it out on the road, as if a car had run over it—or perhaps into the bushes, toward the sparrow? I deliberated, the cat weighed heavily on me, I couldn’t make up my mind, all was quiet, but suddenly my eye

fastened on a tough string that tied a small tree to its pole, one of those trees white with lime, I untied the string, made a loop, I looked around wondering if anyone could see me (the house was asleep, no one would have believed that not so long ago a din had swept through here), I remembered there was a hook in the wall, I don't know what for, perhaps for hanging laundry, I carried the cat there, it wasn't far, about twenty paces from the porch, I hung it on the hook. It hung like the sparrow, like the stick, completing the picture. What next? I was so tired that I was barely alive, I was a bit fearful of returning to the room, what if Fuks is there, not asleep, he'll be asking questions . . . But as soon as I quietly opened the door, it turned out he was fast asleep. I too fell asleep.



## chapter 5

**K**atasia stands over me, going on at length, such villainy, someone hanged Davie, Davie is hanging on a hook in the garden, who hanged him, God have mercy on us, what a disgraceful thing to hang Lena's cat! This woke me brutally. The cat had been hanged. I hanged the cat. I cast an uneasy eye toward Fuks's bed, it was vacant, apparently he was already by the cat, and this gave me a moment of solitude to come to grips with . . .

The news surprised me, as if I were not the strangler. To find myself, with a single leap out of sleep, in something so unbelievable, for God's sake why did I strangle the cat? Now I remembered that, while I was strangling the cat, I felt the same banging through to Lena that I had felt when I was storming at her door—yes, I was getting at her by strangling her beloved cat—I could only have done it in a fit of madness! But why did I hang it on the hook, what recklessness, what stupor! And, what's more, contemplating this stupor, half-dressed, with a dubious smile on my shriveled face that I saw in the mirror, I experienced as much satisfaction as I

did confusion—as if I had played a prank. I even whispered, “It’s hanging,” with joy, with delight. What am I to do? How am I to extricate myself from this? The people downstairs must be going on about it—had anyone seen me?

I strangled the cat.

This fact threw me. The cat had been strangled and was hanging on a hook, and there was nothing I could do but go down and pretend I knew nothing. But still, why did I hang it? So many issues piling up, so many threads interweaving, Lena, Katasia, signs, pounding, et cetera, take even the frog, or the ashtray, et cetera. I was lost in the tumult, it even occurred to me that perhaps I had killed it because of the kettle, because of the excess, to top it all off, an extra horse to the cart, in other words the strangling, like the kettle, was supernumerary. No, that wasn’t true! I had not strangled the cat because of the kettle. What was the link then, what did the cat even have to do with it? I had no time to think, I had to go down and confront a situation that was, even without the cat, uncanny and filled with the night’s quaint oddities . . .

I went downstairs. The house was empty, I surmised that everyone was in the little garden. But before appearing at the door of the porch, I looked out the window from behind the curtain. The wall. On the wall the cat’s body. Hanging on a hook. In front of the wall people standing, among them Lena—she’s farther off, reduced in size, it all looked like a symbol. To make my appearance on the porch was not easy, it was like a jump into the unknown . . . and what if someone had seen me, what if in the next moment I’ll have to mumble something, beside myself with shame? I walked slowly along the gravel path, the sky like sauce, the sun dissolved in a whitish expanse, again the foreboding heat, what a summer! As I was getting closer the cat became more distinct, its tongue

protruding from the side of its jaws, its peepers thrust out of their orbits . . . it hung. It would have been better, I thought, if this were not a cat, a cat by its very nature is already awful, the cat's softness, furriness, are as if grounded in a mad screeching and scratching, a horrifying hissing, yes, hissing, a cat is made for stroking, but also for torturing, although it's a kitten, it is also a tomcat . . . I walked slowly to gain time, because its sight astonished me in the daytime that followed my nighttime act, when it had been less visible and intertwined with that night's wonders. It seemed that sluggishness affected everyone, they too barely moved, while Fuks, much to my amusement, hunched over, studied the wall and the ground below it. Yet Lena's beauty puzzled me, it was so sudden and amazing, and I thought in terror: oh, how much more beautiful she has become since yesterday!

Leon asked me, hands in his pockets: "What do you make of this?" A tuft of pomaded hair stuck out above his baldness, like a ship's lookout.

I breathed a sigh of relief. They didn't know I had done it. No one had seen me.

I turned to Lena: "How sad for you!"

I looked at her, she wore a soft, coffee-colored blouse, a navy skirt, she was nestling into herself, her mouth soft, her arms against her body like the arms of a recruit . . . and the palms of her hands, her feet, her little nose, her little ears were too small, too petite. At first this annoyed me. I had killed her cat, I did it to her brutally, solidly, and now these little feet, they were so little!

But my fury rolled into bliss. Because, please do understand me, she was also too slight in relation to the cat, and that's why she was ashamed, I was sure of it, she was ashamed of the cat! Oh! She was too slight in regard to everything, a tiny bit smaller than she



should be, she was only fit for love, nothing else, and that's why she was ashamed of the cat . . . she knew that whatever pertained to her must have the meaning of love . . . and even though she hadn't guessed who did it, yet she was shamed by the cat, because the cat was her cat, and it had to do with her . . .

Yet her cat was my cat, strangled by me. It was our cat.

Delightful? Nauseating?

Leon asked me:

"Don't you know anything? Who, how? Haven't you noticed anything?"

No, I haven't, late last night I took a walk, I returned well after midnight and came in through the porch, I don't have any idea whether the cat was already hanging—my delight at misleading them grew in step with this deceitful deposition, I was no longer with them but against them, on the other side. As if the cat had transferred me from one side of the medal to the other, into another sphere where mysteries happened, into the sphere of the hieroglyph. No, I was no longer with them. Laughter tickled me as I watched Fuks laboriously looking for signs by the wall and attentively listening to my lies.

I knew the mystery of the cat. I was the perpetrator.

"Hanging the cat! Imagine someone hanging the cat!" Roly-Poly exclaimed with fury and then stopped, as if something had come over her.

Katasia emerged from the kitchen and walked toward us through the flowerbeds. Her "affected" little mouth drew closer to the cat's jaws—I sensed that she, while walking, feels that she is carrying something akin to those jaws, and this provided me with instant gratification, as if my cat were settling itself more solidly on *the opposite* side. The lip was drawing nearer to the cat and all

my doubts, which had been raised by her oh so innocent photograph, evaporated, the lip with its slippery slipaway, was drawing closer, dislocated and despicable, a strange swinish similarity was taking place—and a kind of dark, nocturnal shudder ran through my loins. At the same time I didn't take my eyes off Lena—and imagine my astonishment, my emotion, my secret tremor, ecstatic perhaps, I don't know, when I sensed that Lena's shame intensified at the same time that the depravity of Katasia's mouth rose above the cat. Shame has a strange, contrary nature, even while defending against something it pulls that something into the most deeply personal and intimate domain—and so Lena, shamed by the cat and by the lip with the cat, drew it all into the mysteriousness of her private secrets. And thanks to her shame the cat became united with the lip, like one gear engaging another! But my soundless cry of triumph became united with a groan, how the devil could this fresh, naïve beauty drink in this foulness . . . and by her shame confirm my fantasies! Katasia had a box in her hand—our box with the frog—ah, Fuks had obviously forgotten to take it as we were leaving!

“I found this in my place, in my little room, on the windowsill.”

“What's inside the box?” Leon asked.

“A frog.”

Leon began waving his hands, but Fuks intervened with unexpected vigor. “Excuse me,” he said, taking the box from Katasia. “About this later. We'll explain it. In the meantime I want to invite you all into the dining room. I'd like to have a word with you. Let's leave the cat as it is, I'll look at this again at my leisure.”

Was this ass planning to play detective?

We slowly made our way toward the house, myself, Mrs. Roly-Poly not saying a word, unfriendly, resentful, Leon looking crum-

pled, a tuft of his hair sticking out. Ludwik wasn't there, he wouldn't be back from the office until this evening. Katarasia returned to the kitchen.

In the dining room Fuchs began: "Ladies and gentlemen, let's be frank. The fact is that something's going on here."

Drozdowski, anything to forget Drozdowski, it was clear that he had latched onto this and would push it no matter what. "Something's brewing. Witold and I, we figured this from the time we arrived here, but we felt awkward talking about it, there was nothing definite, just some impressions . . . but after all, let's be frank here."

"I actually," Leon began. "Excuse me," Fuks interrupted to remind him that we had found the hanged bird when we first arrived here . . . a truly puzzling phenomenon. He related how we later detected something like an arrow on the ceiling in our room. An arrow or not an arrow, it could have been an illusion, especially because last evening we had also imagined an arrow here, on the ceiling, do you all remember that? . . . an arrow or maybe a rake . . . in fact, we should not exclude autosuggestion, *attenti!* But out of sheer curiosity, mark you, ladies and gentlemen, for the sport of it, we decided to investigate.

He described our discovery, the position of the stick, the crack in the wall, and he closed his eyes. "Hmm . . . granted . . . the hanging sparrow . . . the hanging stick . . . there's something in it . . . If only these weren't exactly where the arrow was pointing . . ."

I suddenly felt happy at the thought of the cat hanging—like the stick—like the sparrow—I felt happy about the symmetry! Leon got up, he wanted to go see the stick immediately, but Fuks stopped him. "Please wait. First let me tell you everything."

Laboring over the story, however, the cobweb of numerous

conjectures and analogies entangled him, I saw him flagging, at one point he even laughed at himself and at me, then he grew serious again, and with a pilgrim's weariness he expounded on the whiffletree, that the whiffletree was aiming at . . . "Ladies and gentlemen, what's the harm in checking? Since we had checked the arrow, why not do the same with the whiffletree. We just . . . for the sake of checking. Just in case. Not that we mistrust Katsia . . . just for the sake of checking! And, just in case, I had the frog in the box, to simulate a joke if someone caught us. I forgot it as I was leaving, that's why Katsia found it."

"The frog," said Roly-Poly.

Fuks recounted the search, how we searched and searched in vain, and nothing, nothing, but please imagine, we finally came upon a certain detail, trivial, granted, entirely third-rate, I agree, yes, but repeating itself more often than it should have . . . please, ladies and gentlemen, judge for yourselves, I'll simply give you a list . . . And he began to recite, but without conviction and too feebly!

A needle driven into a tabletop.

A pen nib driven into a lemon rind.

A nail file driven into a box.

A safety pin driven into a piece of cardboard.

A nail driven into the wall, right above the floor. Oh, how this litany debilitated him, tired and bored he took a deep breath, wiped the corners of his ogle eyes and stopped, like a pilgrim who has suddenly lost his faith, while Leon crossed his legs, and this immediately took on the character of impatience, which frightened Fuks, who lacked self-confidence anyway, Drozdowski had liquidated it for him. I again became furious at being involved in this with him, I, who had that business with my family in Warsaw,

it was all discouraging, disgusting, such rotten luck, well, it couldn't be helped . . .

"Needles, lemon rinds . . ." Leon grumbled. He didn't finish, but that was enough: needles, lemon rinds, in other words hogwash, hogwash, a pile of garbage and we were on top of it, like two garbage men.

"Wait, sir," Fuks exclaimed, "the remarkable thing is that," turning to Roly-Poly, "when we left there you were also driving in something! With a hammer! Into the tree trunk by the wicker gate. With all your might!"

He looked aside. He adjusted his tie.

"I was driving in something?"

"Yes you, Mrs. Wojtys."

"So what?"

"What do you mean so what, all the other things were driven in, and you too were driving in something!"

"I was not driving in anything, I was just pounding the tree."

Mrs. Wojtys was reaching for words from the resources of a martyr's endless patience.

"Lena, honey, explain why I was pounding the tree."

Her voice was impersonal, stony, and her gaze bore the dictum "I'll bear it."

Lena retreated into herself—more a pretense of a movement than a movement, she was like a snail, like certain shrubs, like anything that recedes or coils up when touched.

She swallowed.

"Lena, tell them the truth!"

"Every once in while, my mother . . . It's a sort of crisis. Nerves. It happens from time to time. Then she grabs anything . . . to relieve herself. She pounds. If it's glass, she breaks it."

She was lying. No, she was not lying! This was the truth and a lie at the same time. The truth, because it corresponded to reality. A lie, because her words (I knew it already) were not important for their truth but only because they originated from her, from Lena—like her gaze, her fragrance. Her telling was halfhearted, discredited by her allure, fearful, as if suspended in air . . . Who, if not a mother, could have sensed this discomfort? Roly-Poly hastened to translate Lena's assertions into the more matter-of-fact language of an old woman.

"I work, gentlemen, day in, day out. Year in, year out. From morning 'til night. Drudgery. You know me, gentlemen, I'm composed and tactful, well-mannered. But when my composure snaps . . . Then I grab anything."

She reflected, then said with deliberation:

"I grab anything . . ."

All of a sudden she couldn't bear it any longer, she yelled, in a frenzy.

"Anything!"

"Honey," Leon said, and she yelled at him: "Anything!"

"Anything," Leon said, whereupon she yelled: "Not anything! Anything!" And she became quiet.

I too sat quietly.

"That's understandable," Fuks melted into civilities. "Quite natural . . . With so much work and trouble . . . Nerves! Yes, yes! . . . That explains it . . . but right after that there was another banging, it seemed to be coming from the house, from the second floor? . . ."

"That was me," Lena declared.

"She," Mrs. Wojtys informed us with a patience that knew no bounds, "when she hears that something is coming over me, she'll

either run to me and catch my arm, or she'll make a lot of noise herself. To bring me to my senses."

That settled it. Lena added a few more details. That they had just returned with Ludwik, that when she heard her mother banging she picked up her husband's shoe (her husband was in the bathroom), and she drummed on the table, then on a suitcase . . . Everything has been cleared up, last night's riddles settled on the dry sands of explanation—it didn't surprise me, I was ready for it, and yet it was tragic, the events we had lived through escaped from our fingers like debris, debris, everything lay at our feet, needles, nails, hammers, crashes . . . I looked at the table and I saw a carafe on a saucer, a crumb brush in the shape of a half-moon, Leon's spectacles (he used them for reading) and other things—all sluggish as if they had given up their last breath. And indifferent.

The indifference of objects, already unfriendly and bordering on stern, was accompanied by the indifference of the people—as if Fuks and I were a nuisance to them. I then became conscious of the cat, and this brought me comfort—because there, on the wall, some of the horror lingered, the jaws were still gaping. And I thought that, even though two of the loud noises lay helplessly on the ground, I had one more loud noise up my sleeve, less easily explainable, a truly vexatious, even a spiteful noise . . . How will she cope with my having banged at her door?

I asked Lena . . . "weren't there two salvos from upstairs? . . . One after the other. I'm sure of it, I was by the front door," I lied, "when the second pounding began. The second noise was quite different."

Oh, to bang on! To bang on into her! Just as I had done during the night, at her door! Was I drawing the strings too tight? What

will she reply? It was as if I were standing at her door again, banging on it . . . Can she guess who banged on her door? Why hadn't she breathed a word?

"A second noise? . . . Ah, yes, after a moment I began to bang again . . . with my fist against the shutter . . . I was upset. I wasn't sure whether mother had calmed down."

She lied.

Out of embarrassment, surmising perhaps that it had been me? . . . Well, how about Ludwik . . . clearly Ludwik was with her, he heard my banging, why didn't he open the door? I asked:

"And Ludwik? Was he with you?"

"Ludwik was in the bathroom at the time."

Ah, Ludwik is in the bathroom, she is in the room alone, I begin to bang, she doesn't open the door—perhaps she guesses that it's me, perhaps not—in any case she knows that whoever is banging, is banging into her. She doesn't open the door, she's terrified. And now she's lying that she was the one banging! Oh, what happiness, what triumph that my lie had banged into her lie, and we were both united in a lie, with my lie I was growing into her lie!

Leon returned to the question:

"Who hanged the cat?"

He noted politely that it's not worth preoccupying ourselves with the noises—that's been settled, anyway he can't say anything on the subject, his bridge game had ended at three in the morning—but who hanged the cat, why was the cat hanged? . . . And he asked this with an emphasis that, aiming at no one, hung in the air: "Who hanged it? I'm asking, who?"

A blind stubbornness spread over his face that was crowned with baldness.

"Who hanged the cat?" he asked in good faith, in all fairness. He



insisted, which began to worry me. Suddenly Mrs. Wojtys, looking straight ahead, pronounced without so much as a quiver:

“Leon.”

But what if it was she? What if she had murdered the cat? Of course I knew who had murdered it, I had murdered it—but with her “Leon” she turned everyone’s gaze upon herself, and Leon’s persistence found, so to speak, its proper direction and tumbled onto her. Regardless of everything, it seemed to me that she could have, that if she had pounded with a hammer in fury, she could have, with the same fury, done as much to the cat . . . and it would be like her, like her short limbs and thick joints, her short and broad torso that abounded in maternal favors—yes, she could have—everything put together, the torso, the limbs, etc., all that could have strangled and hanged the cat!

“Ti, ri, ri!”

Leon hummed.

. . . and a hidden delight resounded in the little melody that immediately went silent . . . it sounded malicious . . . this maliciousness . . .

Wasn’t it delightful that “kookookoo Roly-Poly” had not withstood his questioning, and that his persistence had fallen on her, that she had turned everyone’s gaze upon herself? . . . So, so perhaps he was the one, and no one else, yes, indeed, he could have done it, and why not . . . what about the bread pellets, his fondling them and playing with them, moving them with a toothpick, humming to himself, cutting into an apple peel with his fingernail, his “thinking” and figuring . . . so why couldn’t he have strangled the cat, hanged it? I had strangled it. Yes, I had hanged it. I had hanged it, strangled it, but he *could have* . . . He *could have* hanged it and now he *could be* maliciously happy that his

wife is in dire straits! But if he had not hanged the cat (because I had hanged it), he could have, in any case, hanged the sparrow . . . and the stick!

Because, for God's sake, the sparrow and the stick haven't ceased to be a riddle just because I hanged the cat! They were hanging there, at the outer limits, like two centers of darkness!

Darkness! I needed it! Darkness was vital to me as an extension of the night during which I had been banging into Lena! And Leon too made himself part of this darkness, suggesting the possibility of lascivious sybaritism, of fun that was camouflaged and sealed tight and romping on the Wild Fields of this venerable home—something that would have been less likely had he not just now cut short his ditty for fear of betraying himself . . . His ti-ri-ri had the quality of a roguish, joyful whistling over the fact that his wife had slipped up . . . Could it also have dawned on Fuks that the venerable daddy and husband, the retired banker lounging about the house, who took off solely to play bridge, could have carried on, at the family table, under his wife's eye, his own private games . . . And if he played with pellets, why couldn't he have insinuated arrows on ceilings! And have had other fun and games on the side as well.

A thinker! . . . He was, after all, a thinker . . . he thought and thought—and he could have thought up more than a mere trifle . . .

Something rattled, shook, a din, a truck, huge, with a trailer, the road, it passed, bushes, it disappeared, the windowpanes fell silent, we turned our gaze from the window, but this called up an awakening of "all the rest of it," of all that, there, beyond our circle, and I, for one, heard the barking of little dogs in the neighboring garden, I noticed a carafe filled with water on a small table, noth-

ing important, no, nothing, but the intrusion, the intrusion of that something from outside, of the whole world, somehow foiled our plans, and we began talking in a more disorderly manner, that no stranger could have done it because of the dogs, that they would have attacked him, that last year thieves were prowling here, and about other things, etc., etc., this went on for a rather long time, randomly, I went on catching those other sounds “from the depths,” as if someone were smacking, thwacking somewhere, and the sound of copper creaking from somewhere else, as if from a samovar . . . the barking again, I was tired and discouraged, then suddenly I had the impression that something was again beginning to take on a more distinct shape . . .

“Who did this to you? Why did he do it? Oh, my darling!”

Roly-Poly embraced Lena. They hugged each other. The hug seemed unpleasant, somehow directed against me, and I regained my vigilance, it was the prolongation of the hug by a trifling billionth (which evoked a sense of excess, of protraction and exaggeration) that actually forced me to be on my guard! What was it, and why? Roly-Poly freed Lena from her short, embracing arms.

“Who did this to you?”

What is she up to? Taking aim at someone? Not at Leon . . . at me then? Yes, at me and at Fuks, by hugging Lena she was coaxing into the light of day the whole dark passion of the cat’s murder, well of course, “who did this to you?” meant “it was done to you, and if to you, then passion was the only reason, and who to suspect if not the recently arrived, two young men?” Oh, what bliss! The bliss of the cat becoming a love-cat! . . . look out though, there is danger! I swayed back and forth trying to decide what to say, this was an impasse, a gap, a hole, nothing, and then I heard Fuks speaking, he spoke calmly, as if not connecting it with Roly-Poly,

as if pondering aloud: "First someone hanged the chicken. Then the sparrow. Then the stick. The same hanging over and over in a variety of ways. And it's been going on for a long time, the sparrow pretty well stank when we found it, the first day . . ." Quite so, Fuks was not so stupid, this was a good line of reasoning, the hanging began to prowl at large even before our arrival, so we were above suspicion . . . unfortunately . . . what a pity!

"You're right," mumbled Leon, and I thought that, for a moment, he too must have had us in his sights.

Suddenly everyone began talking away. "Katasia," Roly-Poly said, "that's impossible! Who would think it was Katasia! What an idea! She's been grief-stricken, she was so fond of Davie, she walks about totally dejected, I knew her as a child, my God, if it weren't for my sacrifices, my taking care of her! . . ." She was talking, but she was talking too volubly, like those silly housewives, those boardinghouse proprietresses, and I thought isn't she overplaying her part, but suddenly there was the sound of water from a faucet, a car seemed to be starting somewhere . . . "Someone sneaked in," Leon said, "but to hang a cat . . . Who would sneak in to hang a cat? And the neighbors' dogs . . . they wouldn't let . . ." My shoulder suddenly hurt. I looked out the window, the bushes, the spruce, the sky, the heat, the window frame patched up with a board of a different kind of wood . . . Then Leon said he'd like to have a look at the stick and those other signs . . .

"Signs? Perhaps you can even see some from here." (Fuks said this.)

"I beg your pardon. Come again?"

"Who can assure you that there are no other signs, even right here, in this room . . . signs that we haven't noticed yet?"

"And you? Don't you suspect anyone?" I asked Lena.

She cowered . . . “I don’t suppose anyone wishes me ill . . .” (At that very moment I realized that I did not wish her ill . . . oh, to die! No longer to exist! What a burden, what a millstone! Oh death!)

Leon turned to us, complaining dolefully:

“This is so . . . so . . . unpleasant, gentlemen, so disagreeable . . . So . . . malicious! If one only knew which end of the stick to grab, but why, no one knows, not from over the fence, nor from inside, so who could it be, neither from the right nor the left, what quirkiness, I’d call the police, but what would that do, start tongues wagging, it’s laughable, they’d just laugh, one can’t even call the police, and yet, gentlemen . . . and yet, cat or no cat, it’s not just the cat itself, the whole thing is abnormal, crazed, an aberration or something, suffice it to say that a whole field of thought is opening up, one can think, imagine whatever one likes, mistrust everyone, suspect everyone, and who can assure me that it’s not one of us sitting right here, after all it’s madness, perversion, aberration, so there, it can happen to anyone, to me, and to my wife, and to Katasia, and to you gentlemen, and to my daughter, if it’s an aberration there are no safeguards, none at all, an aberration *fiat ubi vult*, ha, ha, ha, as they say, it can happen everywhere-um, within everyone, within every person and in any shape or form, ha, ha, hum, hum! Such wickedness! It’s such a . . . swinishum, befouled thingee . . . in my old age, to have a home, a family, and not even be sure of the company I’m keeping, what sort of place is this where I’m like a stray dog in my own home, where I can’t trust anyone, where my own house is like a lunatic asylum . . . that’s why all my life I . . . all my work, my efforts, concerns, exertions, my entire life’s battles that I can’t even count or remember, entire years, God be merciful, years, and within them months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, seconds, impossible to count, impossible to

remember, a mountain of these seconds of mine imbued with toil . . . and now I can't trust anyone? Why? What have I done to deserve this? One could say I'm dramatizing and that the cat is insignificant, and yet, gentlemen, the matter is unpleasant, unpleasant, because who can assure me that it will end with the cat, that after the cat it won't be a bigger beast, if there is a lunatic in the house, what can one know, of course I don't want to exaggerate, but there's no question of peace any more until this is cleared up, even in one's own home one is at the mercy of . . . I say, at the mercy of . . .

"Be quiet!"

Pained, he looked at Roly-Poly:

"I'll be quiet, I'll be quiet, fine, but I'll think . . . To think, that I will not stop!"

Lena said aside through her teeth "you'd better stop," and I thought I noticed something new in her tone, something that wasn't part of her before, and yet . . . what can one know? I ask you, what can one know? A rickety cart carrying people went by on the road, I only glimpsed their heads as they passed the last bush, dogs were barking, a shutter on the floor above, a child whining, a general rustling inside the house, universal, widespread, in unison, while on the cupboard there is a bottle, a cork . . . Would she be capable of killing a small child? She, with such a gentle gaze? But, if she were to kill, this would immediately meld with her gaze into a perfect whole, it would turn out that the child-killer can have a gentle gaze . . . What can one know? The cork. The bottle.

"What are you two up to? . . ." Leon said, getting on his high horse.

"Perhaps you can give us some advice?" Fuks responded meekly. "Let's look at the arrow and the stick . . ."

It was hot, one of those moments in small rooms on the first floor when it's sultry, when one can see the dust in the air and be overwhelmed by exhaustion, my legs hurt, the house was wide open, and constantly there was something, somewhere, a bird flew by, a humming everywhere, Fuks was saying: "... here I agree with you, director, in any case it's good that we came to an understanding, and if anyone should see anything new, we should immediately, ladies and gentlemen, share it with one another . . . " Drozdowski. Drozdowski. All of this—digging itself out with difficulty from under this sticky grease, lost in a crowd like someone who has managed to crawl halfway out, who is already on his knees but at any moment will fall back again, so many, so many details to consider . . . I remembered that I hadn't had any breakfast . . . I had a headache. I wanted a cigarette, I put my hand in my pocket, no matches, the matches were at the other end of the table, next to Leon, to ask or not to ask, finally I showed him my cigarette, he nodded, extended his arm, pushed the box in my direction, I reached for it.

## chapter 6

**T**hey buried it behind the fence, by the road. Ludwik took charge when, returning from the office, he heard the whole story. Disgusted, he mumbled “what savagery,” he hugged Lena and then proceeded to bury the cat in the ditch. I loafed around . . . it was out of the question to study for my exams, I went out on the road, came back, wandered about in the little garden. From a distance, cautiously, so no one would notice, I had a look at the spruce, and at the trunk that Roly-Poly had pounded, at the door to Katasia’s room, at the place around the corner of the house where I stood when I heard the din from the second floor . . . in those places and things, in the juxtaposition of those places and things, was hidden the path that had led me to the strangling, if I could appropriately decipher the arrangement of those places and things, I might find out the truth about my having strangled the cat. I even walked into the kitchen on some pretext to check up on Katasia’s mouth one more time. But the trouble was that there was so much of everything, the labyrinth was expanding, lots of things, lots of places, lots of



events, isn't it so that every pulsation of our life is composed of billions of trifles, what is one to do? That's it, I didn't know what to do. I had absolutely nothing to do. I was unemployed.

I even went into the empty guest room where I had first seen Lena and her leg on the iron mesh of the bed, I returned and stopped in the hallway to recall the creaking of the floor when, that first night, I had gone out looking for Fuks. I identified the little arrow on the ceiling, I looked at the ashtray, and, gazing around, I found the little piece of cork on the neck of the bottle—but my looking around was mindless, I did nothing more than look, among the minutiae I felt as weak as someone convalescing from a severe illness, whose world boils down to a small beetle or to a patch of sunlight . . . and at the same time like someone who, after time long passed, tries to re-create his unfathomable, inscrutable history (I smiled because I remembered Leon with his minutes, his seconds) . . . what was I looking for, what was I looking for? Some basic tone? A leading melody, a core round which I could re-create, compose the story of my life. But the distraction, not only within me, intrinsic to me, but also flowing in from without, from the diversity and overabundance, from the entanglement, did not allow me to concentrate on anything, everything was equally important and equally unimportant, I just came and went . . . The cat. Why on earth did I strangle her cat? Looking over the clods of dirt in the garden, those that Fuks and I had inspected during our progress along the line indicated by the arrow (when I was marking the direction with the broom), I thought that it would be easier to find an answer if I were less puzzled about my feelings for her. What did I feel for her?—I wondered, separating the blades of grass, the same ones as before—what did

I feel? Love, love—my foot, passion, yes, but what sort? It all began because I didn't know, just didn't know who she was, what she was like, she was complex, blurry, inscrutable (as I had thought while staring at the continents, archipelagos, and nebulae of the ceiling), she was intangible and tiresome, I could imagine her this way or that, in a hundred thousand situations, consider her from one side or another, lose her, then find her again, turn her every which way (I wove my trend of thought as I was looking over the terrain between the house and the kitchen, watching the little white trees tied to stakes with ropes), but there could be no doubt that her emptiness was sucking me in, soaking me up, it was she and she alone, yes, yes, but, I wondered, as my eyes became lost in the twists and turns of the bent, damaged drainpipe, what did I want with her? To caress? To torture? To humiliate? To adore? Or did I want something swinish, or angelic, with her? What was important to me: to wallow in her, or to embrace and cuddle her? I don't know, don't know, that's just the point, that I don't know . . . I could take her under the chin and look into her eyes, how am I supposed to know, how . . . Or spit in her mouth. And yet she weighed on my conscience, emerging as if from a dream, with a heavy despair that trailed like flowing hair . . . And then the cat seemed even more horrible . . .

In my wanderings I visited the sparrow—even though it bothered me more and more that the sparrow played a role disproportionate to its significance and, even though it could not be linked to anything, it kept emerging, heavy and motionless in the background. However (I thought, walking slowly down that burning-hot road and going deeper through the dried grasses), one could not deny certain concurrences, such as the cat, the sparrow, they

were somewhat related, a cat eats sparrows after all, ha, ha, how sticky is this cobweb of connections! Why does one have to suffer from the favor and disfavor of associations?

This, however, was secondary; it actually seemed to me that something was slowly breaking through to the foreground, something more significant, something even importunate . . . arising from the fact that I not only strangled the cat but also hanged it. Granted, I hanged it because I didn't know what to do with the carcass, it occurred to me mechanically to hang it, after so many adventures with the sparrow and the stick . . . I hanged it out of anger, furious that I had let myself be drawn into this stupid venture, so for the sake of revenge, also to play a trick, to have a good laugh and at the same time to turn the suspicion in another direction—granted, yes, granted—but I had indeed hanged the cat, and this hanging (even though it was my very own, taking its origins from within me) became linked with the hangings of the sparrow and the stick—three hangings, no longer two hangings, that was a fact. A naked fact. Three hangings. That's why hanging began to rise in this totally cloudless heat, and it wasn't entirely senseless to walk toward the thicket, to the sparrow, to see how it hung—this came to me who, after all, was lost, who was waiting for something to finally emerge, to take over. To see how it hung? . . . I stopped at the edge where the bushes began, and I stood, one foot in front of the other, in the grass, better not, let it be, if I go there the hanging will gain in power, obviously, one has to be careful . . . who knows, indeed, it's almost certain that if we hadn't gone to the sparrow, it would not have become so . . . better be careful here! And I stood in one spot, knowing full well that any hesitation would only increase the weight of my moving forward, into the bushes . . . which is what happened. I entered. Shade, it

was pleasant. A butterfly took wing. I'm already here—the dome of bushes, a recess, it's darker here, it hangs there on a piece of wire . . . here it is.

Always busy with the same thing, doing the same thing—it hung just as when Fuks and I had entered—it hung and hung. I watched the dried-up little ball that resembled a sparrow less and less, funny, I could laugh, no, better not, but on the other hand I didn't quite know what to do because, after all, since I was already here it was more than just to look at it . . . I lacked some appropriate gesture, perhaps a wave of my hand, saying something . . . no, better not, let's not exaggerate . . . Oh, how the blotches of sunlight spread over the black earth! And that beetle! The tree trunk, the rounded fir! Since I came here to bring my hanging of the cat to the sparrow, it has become clear that it is not at all a trifle, it is a deed that I have inflicted upon myself, amen. Amen. Amen. The little leaves are curling at the edges from the heat. What could there be in that discarded can, who discarded it? And the ants, I hadn't noticed them before. Let's go. It's great that you've linked your hanging of the cat with the hanging of the sparrow, now this is something totally different! Why something different? Don't ask. Let's go, what's this rag? I was back and opening the gate to the garden, the sun scorched me from the diffuse, trembling sky. Supper. As always, Leon was jokie-jokie, meatie-pie Roly-Polieee feediedum, and yet the artificiality and tension engendered by the cat were infecting us, and even though everyone was making an effort to be totally at ease, this naturalness actually smacked of the theatrical. Not that they suspected each other, no, not at all, yet they were in a net of circumstantial evidence, already entangled in spying, the intangibility of it pressed on, creating a kind of tangibility in the air . . . no, no one suspected anyone else,

yet no one could vouch that the others were not suspecting him, so they treated each other politely, kindly, just in case . . . slightly embarrassed that in spite of their efforts they were not quite themselves, so that this, the easiest thing in the world, was becoming difficult for them and forced. For this reason their total behavior had somehow undergone a kind of distortion, relating to the cat and to all the strange discoveries connected with it, whether they liked it or not, Roly-Poly, for example, came out accusing Leon, or Lena, or both of them, that they had forgotten to remind her of something and this was, on her part, in some way cat-related, as if she had done something or other because of the cat . . . and Leon's talkie-talk also contained within itself a slightly morbid distortion, peeking in that direction . . . This was familiar to me, they were following in my footsteps, their gaze became labored, it began to avoid direct contact with another face, it ferreted in corners, ran deep, searched around, checked, on the shelf, behind the wardrobe . . . and the familiar wallpaper, that family backdrop, became a jungle or else it stretched into the giddy distances of the archipelagos, those continents on the ceiling. What if . . . What if . . . Oh, at first these were minor aberrations, tics, an insignificant affectation, still innocent, they were far removed from the state in which, as if in a fever, one carries out crazy calculations, computing the relation of squares in the floor to stripes on a rug, because what if, what if . . . And, of course, they did not avoid the subject of the cat, indeed, they talked about the cat as well; but they talked about the cat only because not talking about the cat would have been worse than talking about the cat, and so on, and so on, etc., etc., etc.

Lena's hand. On the tablecloth, as always by the plate and just

next to the fork, and in the light shed by the lamp—I saw it, as I had recently seen the sparrow, it lay here, on the table, as the other hung on the branch . . . the hand here, it there . . . and with a great effort I tried, as if a lot depended on it, I tried to be clearly aware that while the hand is here, the sparrow is there . . . it is there, like the stick and like the cat . . . it is in its thicket, in this evening’s approaching night, on the other side of the road, in the bushes, while the hand is here, on the tablecloth, under the lamp . . . I pursued this by way of an experiment, out of curiosity, with all my might, indeed by the sweat of my brow, I worked hard, but what of it, the sparrow was there, the hand was here, my strivings, my efforts could not go beyond this, it was all inept, no, it would not connect—and her hand lay quietly on the white tablecloth. For naught. For naught. Oh, oh! Her hand picks up the fork, it picks up—no, doesn’t pick up—it moves its fingers closer, covers the fork with its fingers . . . My hand, next to my fork, moves closer, it picks up—doesn’t pick up—but instead it covers the fork with its fingers. I silently lived the ecstasy of this mutual understanding, albeit false, albeit one-sided, concocted by me . . . But, there was a spoon nearby, half a centimeter from my hand and, exactly in the same way, a spoon lay half a centimeter from her hand—should I lean the side of my hand against the spoon? I can do it without attracting anyone’s attention, the distance is tiny. I’m doing it—my hand has just moved and is touching the spoon—and I see that her hand has also moved and is also touching the other spoon.

All this within time that was reverberating like a gong, filled to the brim, cascade, vortex, swarm, cloud, the Milky Way, dust, sounds, events, this and that, etc., etc., etc. . . . Such a trifle on the very boundary of chance and non-chance, what can one know,

maybe yes, maybe no, her hand has moved, maybe intentionally, or maybe half-intentionally, half-unintentionally, *fifty, fifty*. Roly-Poly removes a lid, Fuks tugs at his cuff . . .

Next morning we left early for an excursion in the mountains.

This was Leon's idea, nothing new, something he's been chattering about for quite a while, saying I'll deal you something new, I'll let you in on a strange sweetness in those fatherland mountains of ours, I'll whirr-in a real tidbit for you to chew on, never mind the Turnias, the Kościeliskas, the Sea Eye, which are, if you'll pardon the expression, oldie, postcard-like slippers, licked and crumpled, ha, ha, old-socks guano tourism, they are nothing, but from a certain mountain panorama I'll spin you a yarn of yarns, a fistful of sights, I tell you, first class *primo*, I'll set your soul hopping for the rest of your life, a treasure and a dream, miraculum miraculosum, the one and only dream-like enchantment. Where did I get this idea, you'll ask. The answer is that I accidentally lost my way, how many years ago was it? . . . twenty-seven . . . in July, I remember it as if it were today, I lost my way in Kościeliska, I crawled along, came upon a vista valley panorama the likes of which you've never seen, a couple of miles off the main road, you can get there in a horse cart, there's even a chalet, though abandoned, the bank bought it, yes, I inquired about it, they were supposed to submit proposals, let me tell you, what a sight! . . . A vision, I'd say, draped with nature's garland, a grassy reverie, a flowery and tree-like reverie, a brook-like babbling poetry, with alpine hills and dales in the spirit of dark greenery, and yet with a lofty and singular loftiness, hey, hey, O my God, *tutti frutti*, finger-licking! We could go for a day, for two days, by horse carts, with bedding and delicious travel morsels, on my word of honor, for one's whole life, for life, once one has

set his dreaming eyes upon it, ha, ha, ha! I live on it to this day, I swore to go there once more before I died, O God, O God, years pass, I'll keep my vow! . . .

Yet it wasn't until after the cat that the prospect of taking fresh air, of entertainment and change appealed to us to the same degree that the house became stifling . . . and Roly-Poly, after saying "you thought and thought and finally thought up something" and "enough talk, Leon, enough," began to view this project more favorably, especially since Leon remarked that this would be a convenient way to reciprocate socially toward Lena's two girlfriends from Zakopane. Finally then, Leon's insistence on "emerging from his boar's den" was answered by Roly-Poly's culinary and other activities, making sure that the said social reciprocation would turn out first class.

And so, while the configuration: stick—sparrow—cat—mouth—hand and so on, and so on (with all their offshoots, ramifications, tentacles), while, like I say, this configuration persisted, a fresh, healthier trend emerged, everyone happily assented, in a fit of good cheer Roly-Poly cautioned me and Fuks: "it will be sweet," because both Lena's friends are newlyweds, therefore no less than three cute couples "in the honey state" will be taking part in this excursion, it will be a pleasant, social diversion, so much more original than the usual excursions to places already "banalized." Of course this too was happening in connection with the cat. The cat was the *spiritus novens*, if it were not for the cat no one would have been eager to go on this excursion . . . in any case this activity distracted us from the cat . . . brought relief . . . in the last few days some kind of torpidity had settled in, no one felt like doing anything, suppers, one after the other, as regular as the nightly moon, unchanging, while constellations, arrangements,



configurations suffered a certain wear and tear and paled . . . I had begun to worry that everything would slow to a snail's pace, like a chronic illness, a chronic entanglement . . . So it was better for something to happen, even this excursion. Yet at the same time I was somewhat surprised at Leon's zeal, he constantly returned to that day twenty-seven years ago when, lost, he stumbled upon such a fantastic sight (so strike me, beat and torture me—I can't piece it all together—I was wearing my old shirt, take note, the color of coffee, the one in the photo, ah but which pantaloons, eh? . . . dear God, y'know, I dunno, all lost and vanished, something was there somehow somewhere, and my legs, I was washing my legs, washing where, washing in what, dear, dear God, something is coming back, not coming back, sweet Jesus and Mary, oh, my tormented pate, thinking and thinking . . . ), and I found this surprising, this concurrence seemed more and more significant, namely that he and I were both sinking, each in his own creations, in his own way, he in the past, I in all those trifling details.

Needless to say my suspicions rose again, did he or did he not have a hand in it . . . the sparrow . . . the stick . . . How many times had I told myself, nonsense! Yet there was something about him, yes, something about him, his bald and spherical, bespectacled face grimacing with pain, but also like that of a glutton, his gluttony was obvious, and a sly gluttony at that . . . suddenly he takes off from the table and promptly returns with a dried weed: "This here is from there-hum! It's my keep-a-sakum to this day! Yes from there, that astonishing-marvelousum place, yet devil only knows . . . did I pick it in the meadow? . . . or by the roadside? . . ."

He stands there, weed in hand, his head bald, while something is running through my head: "Weed . . . weed . . . stick? . . ."

Still nothing.

Two days, three days passed. Finally, one morning at seven o'clock we were boarding our horse carts, one could imagine that we were indeed parting ways: in front of us stood the house, already in a state of abandonment and stamped with imminent loneliness, it was to remain under Katasia's care, she was given instructions concerning various precautions, that she should keep an eye on everything, not leave the doors ajar—in case of emergency, Katasia, knock on the neighbors' door—yet these orders concerned something that would soon be separate from us, left behind. And that's what happened. In the listless dawn the trusty horses set out along the sandy road, the house disappeared, the pair of dappled mares trotted, the mountain peasant sat ahead in the driver's seat, the cart shook and squeaked, Ludwik, Lena, and I sat on well-padded seats (Fuks was traveling with the Leons in the first cart), our eyes heavy from lack of sleep . . . after the house disappeared only movement remained, bouncing in the ruts, sleepy noises of the ride and things passing by . . . but the excursion had not quite begun, first we had to drop by a *pension* to pick up one of the young couples. More jolting. We arrive, the young couple scrambles into the cart with all kinds of small packages, laughter, barely-awake kisses with Lena, conversation, though listless, everything faint . . .

We emerged onto the main road and dropped into the countryside opening before us, we are moving. The horses are trotting, slowly. A tree. It approaches, passes, vanishes. A fence and a house. A little field planted with something. Sloping meadows and rounded hills. A rack wagon. A sign on a barrel. A car passes us at full speed. Our ride is filled with shaking, squeaking, rocking, trotting, the horses' rumps and tails, the mountain peasant with his whip, and above it all the early morning sky, and the sun, al-

ready wearisome, already beginning to burn our necks. Lena was bouncing up and down and swaying with the cart, but that wasn't important, actually nothing was important in the slow vanishing that makes up a ride, something else was preoccupying me, something that had no flesh, it was the relation of the speed with which closer objects came and went, to the slower coming and going of objects farther away, and also in comparison to the quite distant ones that almost stood still—that's what was preoccupying me. I thought that during a ride objects appear, only to disappear, objects are unimportant, the landscape is unimportant, the only thing that is left is appearance and disappearance. A tree. A field. Another tree. It passes.

I wasn't present. Isn't it true (I thought), that one is almost never present, or rather never fully present, and that's because we have only a halfhearted, chaotic and slipshod, disgraceful and vile relationship with our surroundings; and, what's more, people who take part in social games, on an excursion for example (I figured), are not even ten percent present. And, in our case especially, the pressing wave of objects and objects, of views and views, the vastness after such a recent confinement, only yesterday in fact, when we were within the ambit of tight clods of dirt, motes, dryness, cracks, etc., etc., pustulations and glasses, bottles, yarns, corks, etc., etc. and patterns arising out of them, etc. etc., this wave was simply dissolving everything, a huge river, an inundation, a deluge, immeasurable waters. I was vanishing, next to me Lena was vanishing. Jolting. Trotting. Scanty, sleepy little conversations with the new couple. Nothing really, except that I'm moving away with Lena from the house where Katasia stayed behind, and moment by moment we are farther away, and in a moment we'll be even farther away, while there, the house is there, the wicket-gate, the

puny whitewashed trees tied to stakes, and the house is there, while we are moving farther and farther away.

Yet in time our cart became animated, the new couple, he, Lukie, she, Lulu, began to come to life and soon, after the initial “oh no, Lukie, did I forget the thermos,” and “Lulu, move that backpack, it’s hurting me,” they totally abandoned themselves to lulu-ing!

Lulu, younger than Lena, plump and pink, with cute little dimples, little peek-a-boo fingers, with her pocketbook, handkerchief, umbrella, rouge, cigarette lighter, twirled in the midst of it all and prattled hee-hee-hee, so this is the road to Kościeliska, it’s jolting us, I like it, it’s been a while since I’ve had such a jolting, how long has it been, Lukie, since you’ve had such a jolting, what a small porch, look Lena, I’d have a little living room there, Lukie would have his study by the big window, I’d get rid of those figurines in the garden, I hate those little dwarfs, do you like those dwarfs, Lena? You didn’t forget the film, did you, Lukie? And the binoculars? Lukie ow-ow, how that board is cutting into my bum, oh, oh, what are you doing, what’s this mountain? And Lukie was just like Lulu, though stocky and with thick calves . . . yet chubby-cheeked, all of a dither, rounded at the hips, with upturned nose, patterned socks, little Tyrolean hat, a camera, little blue eyes, a vanity case, plump little hands, wearing knickers. Intoxicated at being a pair of Lulus—he, Lukie, she, Lulu—they abandoned themselves to lulu-ing, played up to one another, so when Lulu saw a pretty villa and remarked that her mother is accustomed to creature comforts, Lukie too let it drop that his mother takes the waters abroad every year and added that his mother has a collection of Chinese lampshades, upon which Lulu said that her mother has seven ivory elephants. One couldn’t resist smirking a little at

this twaddle, yet my smirk gave them new gusto, so they twaddled on, and their twaddle linked up with the insignificance that was moving monotonously through the horses' trot, a distancing movement, splitting the land into concentric circles, radiating faster or slower. Ludwik pulled out his watch.

"Half-past nine."

The sun. Heat. Nonetheless the air was fresh.

"Let's have a bite of something."

And yet the truth is that I'm going away with Lena—this is important, strange, significant, how could I not have grasped its significance until now, considering that everything was left behind there, in the house, or in front of the house, so much, so much, beginning with the bed, then the tree, and even the final touching of the spoon . . . and now here we are homeless . . . somewhere else . . . while the house is moving away with its constellations and configurations, with the whole affair, it is already "back there," it's "back there," and the sparrow is "back there," in the bushes, the blotches of sunlight on the black earth are also "back there" . . . oh how lofty, except that my thought about this loftiness is also constantly receding and, by receding, growing weaker . . . under the influx of landscapes. (Yet at the same time, and with total presence of mind, as if out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a fact worthy of attention: the sparrow was receding, but its existence did not weaken, it merely became that which was receding, that's all.)

"Sandwiches, where is the thermos, give me that piece of paper, Lukie, leave me alone, where are the mugs mother gave us, be careful! You're stupid, Lukie!" "You're stupid, Lulu! Ha, ha, ha!"

The other was no longer an issue; and yet, by not being an issue, it was an issue. Lena's little face was slight, barely perceptible, but Ludwik's face was also as if he were not alive, it was annihilated by

space that stretched as far as the barrier of the mountain chain which, in turn, stretched on, ending at the limits remoteness in a mountain of unknown name. I generally didn't know most of their names, at least half the things we saw were unnamed, mountains, trees, weeds, vegetables, tools, settlements.

We were in the highlands.

What about Katasia? In the kitchen? With her lips . . . and I glimpsed Lena's little mouth, what's happening with it, so far away from the other connotation, how is it doing separated from . . . nothing, this was a mouth traveling in a cart on an excursion, I ate a piece of turkey, the provisions Roly-Poly had prepared were tasty.

Slowly new life began to evolve on the cart, as if on a distant planet, and so Lena, and even Ludwik, let themselves be drawn by the Lulus into lulu-ing, and Lena exclaimed, "what are you doing, Ludwik?!" while he in turn said, "calm down, honey!" . . . I watched on the quiet, unbelievable, so they too could be like that? So that's how they were? A strange ride, unexpected, we began our descent from the highlands, the distances became shorter, the swelling of the land crept down on either side, Lena was threatening him with her finger, he was blinking his eyes . . . a frivolous, superficial gaiety, in any case they were capable of it . . . interesting . . . moving away ultimately had its privileges, and in the end I too managed to come up with a couple of wisecracks, damn it, we were on an excursion after all!

The mountains that had been drawing nearer for a long time suddenly lunged from all sides, we went into a valley, here at least blessed shade spread over the slopes that were blooming on high with sun-drenched greenery—and silence, God knows from where, from everywhere, and coolness flowing like a stream, so pleasant!

A curve, rock faces and mountain peaks are rising, sudden chasms, exhausting screes, mellow-green domes, pinnacles, or peaks, jagged ridges and vertical surfaces falling down precipitously, bushes clinging to them, farther, boulders on high, meadows sliding in a silence that emerged inscrutable, universal, sweeping, immobile, expanding, and so overwhelming that the rattling of our cart and its insignificant rolling seemed as if something apart. The panoramas persisted for a while, then something new emerged, pressing on, it was so naked, or entangled, or glittering, at times heroic, there were precipices, indurations, crevices, variations of hanging rocks, then, pastoral scenes, for example, in ascending, descending rhythms composed of bushes, trees, wounds, lesions, and subsidences, floated in, sweet at times, at times lacey. Various things—various things—strange distances, bewildering twists and turns, a tight, imprisoned space, charging or receding, twisting and turning, striking up or down. Movement, immense, immobile.

“Oh Lulu, dear me!”

“Lukie, I’m scared . . . I’m afraid to sleep by myself!”

Agglomeration, whirl and welter . . . too much, too much, too much, crowding, movement, heaping, crashing, pushing, a general hurly-burly, huge mastodons filling space that, in the blinking of an eye, would break up into thousands of details, combinations, masses of rock, brawls, in a clumsy chaos, and suddenly all those details would again collect into an overpowering shape! Just like the other time, in the bushes, that time in front of the wall, in relation to the ceiling, like in front of the pile of rubble with the whiffletree, like in Katasia’s little room, like in relation to the walls, cupboards, shelves, curtains, where forms also took shape—but while those were trifles, this was a roaring storm of matter. And I had become such a reader of still life that, in spite of myself, I

examined, I searched and studied, as if indeed there were something here to decipher, and I reached for the ever-new combinations that our tiny cart rolled out before us, rattling, from the mountain womb. Yet nothing, nothing. A soaring bird appeared—high in the sky, immobile—vulture, hawk, eagle? No, it was not a sparrow, and by the very reason of not being a sparrow it was after all a non-sparrow, and being a non-sparrow, it was, in a small way, a sparrow . . .

O God! How the sight of this solitary bird regaled me, soaring above everything, supreme! The highest point, the reigning point. Really? I had actually been tired by the disorder there, in the house, by that jumble, by the chaos of mouths, of the hangings, the cat, the kettle, Ludwik, the stick, the drain, Leon, the pounding, the banging into, the hand, the hammering, the needle, Lena, the whiffletree, Fuks's gaze, and so on, and so on, etc., etc., etc., as in a fog, in a horn of plenty, chaos . . . While here a bird reigned in azure—hosanna!—how on earth had this tiny, distant point taken control, like a cannon shot, while chaos and confusion lay at its feet? I looked at Lena. She was staring at the bird.

Which bypassed us in a semicircle, leaving us again with the raging uproar of the mountains, beyond which were other mountains, each consisting of varied areas abounding in pebbles—how many pebbles?—and so, that which had been “behind,” now rode across the front line of the advancing army, in a strange silence, explained in some measure by the immobility of universal movement, Lukie, wow, look at that rock! Lulu, do you see it, it's a real nose! Look, Lukie, there's a granddad with a pipe! Look to the left, do you see it, he's kicking with his high-top boots! Kicking who, kicking where, there's a chimney! Another turn crowding in, a balcony drifting in, then a triangle—and a tree that suddenly



captivates you, clinging somewhere—one of many—also captivating, but then it dissolved and disappeared. A priest.

In a cassock. He was sitting by the road, on a rock. A priest in a cassock, sitting on a rock, in the mountains? I was reminded of the kettle, because the priest was like the kettle, back there. The cassock was also extra.

We stopped.

“Can we give you a ride, Father?”

Chubby-cheeked and young, with a duck-like nose, his face round like a peasant’s jutted out of his priestly collar—he lowered his gaze. “May God repay you,” he said. Still he didn’t stir. His hair was sticky with sweat. When Ludwik asked him if we could give him a ride somewhere, he didn’t seem to hear, he got in the cart mumbling his thanks. Trot, rattle, riding onward.

“I was hiking in the mountains . . . I went off the road a bit.”

“You must be tired, Father.”

“Oh, yes . . . I live in Zakopane.”

The hem of his cassock was soiled, his shoes weary, his eyes strangely red—had he also spent the night in the mountains? He explained slowly: he had gone on a trip, lost his way . . . but why on a trip in a cassock? Why lost in a terrain cut through by a valley? When did he start on his trip? Not questioning him too much, we gave him this and that out of our provisions, he ate sheepishly, then sat helpless, the cart jolted him, the sun was scorching, there was no more shade, we were thirsty but didn’t feel like pulling out the bottles, just riding and riding. The shadows of protruding boulders and rocks bore down perpendicularly to the very bottom on either side, and we heard the rush of a cascade. We rode on. Up to this point I had never been interested in the fact, curious as it

may be, that for ages a certain percentage of people have been isolated by the cassock and assigned to God's service—that branch of experts on God, heavenly functionaries, spiritual civil servants. Here however, in the mountains, was this guy in black, mixing in with our travel, who did not fit into the mountain chaos because he was something extra . . . exploding, overflowing . . . almost like the kettle?

This discouraged me. Interestingly, when the eagle or the hawk shot above everything, I felt invigorated—probably because (I thought), being a bird, it related to the sparrow—but also because, and perhaps particularly because, it hung there, uniting within itself the sparrow and the hanging, and allowing the idea of hanging to unite the hanged cat with the hanged sparrow, yes, yes, (I saw it more and more clearly), and it even gave the idea of hanging a preeminence, hanging above all else, regal . . . and if I'm able (I thought) to decipher the idea, discover its main thread, to understand or even have just a sense of where all this is striving, at least in this one aspect of the sparrow, of the stick and the cat, then it will be easier for me to deal with the mouths and everything else that revolves around them. Because (I was trying to read this charade) there is no doubt (and it was a painful puzzle) that I myself am the secret of the mouth-lip union, it happened within me, I and no one else had created this union—but (attention!), by hanging the cat I had connected myself (probably? to a certain degree?) with the other group, that of the sparrow and the stick, I belonged, then, to both groups—doesn't it follow then, that the union of Lena and Katasia can happen only through me?—and wasn't I really the one who, by hanging the cat, had established a bridge uniting everything . . . in what sense? Oh, that wasn't clear,

but in any case something had begun to form itself, an embryo of a totality was being born, and here a huge bird hangs above me—hanging. Well and good. But why the devil does the priest butt in, from outside, from a different barrel, unexpected, superfluous, idiotic? . . .

Like the kettle, back there! And my annoyance now was no less than then . . . when it hurled me at the cat . . . (yes, perhaps I had hurled myself at the cat because of the kettle, unable to bear the drop that caused the cup to overflow . . . and maybe, by doing just about anything, one will force reality to emerge, just like throwing any old thing into the bushes when something indistinct is moving there) . . . yes, yes, was strangling the cat my infuriated response to the provocation of the nonsense of the kettle? . . . In any case, be careful, shaveling, because who can guarantee that I won't throw something at you, that I won't do something to you . . . something . . . He sat, not even suspecting my fury, we drove on, mountains and mountains, the horses' trot, the heat . . . My eyes caught a little detail . . . he was moving his fingers . . .

He unconsciously spread the thick fingers of both his hands, then intertwined them, the worm-like working of his fingers down below, between his knees, was persistent and unpleasant.

Conversation.

"Are you all in Kościeliska for the first time?"

To which Lulu, in the tone of a bashful schoolgirl replied: "Yes, Father, this is our honeymoon trip, we got married last month."

Lukie immediately jumped in with a cute little expression on his face, no less bashfully delightful: "We are a couple of little newlyweds!"

The priest cleared his throat, disconcerted. So Lulu said, like a

schoolgirl squealing to the principal on her classmates: “They are too, Father,” she pointed to Lena and Ludwik, “they are too!”

“They’ve recently been given permission to . . . !” Lukie exclaimed.

Ludwik said: “HMMMMM!” in a deep bass-baritone, then Lena’s little smile, the priest’s silence, oh, the Lulus, what a tone they contrived for the benefit of this high-priest! . . . who still fumbled nervously with his stubby fingers, he was pathetic, helpless, so like a peasant, and something told me that perhaps he had some little business on his conscience, what had he done with those stubby fingers? And . . . and . . . oh . . . oh . . . those fingers down below, moving . . . and my fingers . . . and Lena’s . . . on the tablecloth. The fork. The spoon.

Lukie, leave me alone, he’s an ordained priest, what will he think! What’s the matter with you, Lulu, surely an ordained priest won’t have any bad thoughts! Lukie, wow, if you knew how your cheek is trembling! And suddenly . . . We turned off. We cut across a valley, and by a difficult and barely visible cart path we rode into the side of the mountains! We were in a canyon that was closing in, but beyond that, a lesser, incidental, ravine opened to one side, where we trotted among new peaks and mountainsides and were now totally cut off . . . and this too was incidental . . . new trees, grasses, rocks, the same yet totally different, new, and constantly being stamped as fortuitous by our turn off the main road. Yes, yes, I thought, he may have done something, he has something on his conscience.

What? A sin. What kind of a sin? Hanging a cat. That’s a trivial matter, killing a cat, what sin is that . . . yet this man in a cassock, descended from the confessional, from the church, from prayer,

crawls onto a road, crawls into our cart, and of course immediately there is sin crime conscience penance, tra, la, la, tra, la, la, such a ti-ri-ri . . . he crawls into the cart, and there is sin.

Sin, so actually he is a colleague, a priest-colleague, he fumbles with his stubby fingers, while he has something on his conscience. Just as I have! Comradeship and brotherhood, he's fumbling and fumbling with those stubby fingers of his, what about those fingers, maybe they too had strangled? Now there came an entirely new invasion of heaping, breakdown, a new, wonderfully green effervescence, peaceful, darkly larch-like, pine-like, sleepily azure, Lena in front of me, with her hands, and all that arrangement of hands—my hands, Lena's hands, Ludwik's hands—had received an infusion in the shape of the stubby-fingered priestly hands, to which I couldn't devote sufficient attention because of the ride, the mountains, the incidental nature of things, God Almighty, merciful God, why can't one focus one's attention on anything, the world is a hundred million times too abundant, what will I do with my inattention, hey, you mountain husbandman, you're dancing the mountain robbers' dance, Lulu, let him be, Lukie, leave me alone, Lulu, oh dear, my leg's asleep, we're riding, riding, onward, well and good, one thing is clear, that bird hung too high, and it's just fine that the priest-colleague is fumbling down below, we're riding, riding, the movement is monotonous, an immense river flows on, flows by, the rambling, the trotting, the heat, scorching heat, we arrive.

It's two o'clock in the afternoon. Our surroundings are more spacious now, a dell of sorts, a meadow, pines and spruces, a lot of boulders sticking out of the meadow, a house. Wooden, with a porch. In the shade, behind the house, is the cart in which the Wojtyses had arrived with Fuks and yet another pair of newly-

weds. They appeared in the doorway, a hubbub of voices, greetings, climbing down from the cart, it was a great ride, have you been here long, wait a minute, this bag here, we're all set, Leon, take the bottles . . .

Yet they were as if from another planet. So were we. Our stay here was the stay "somewhere else"—and the house here was plainly not the other house . . . the one that was back there.



## chapter 7

Everything was happening at a distance. It was not the other house that had moved away from us, it was we who had moved away from it . . . and this new house, in nightmarish and forlorn deathlike silence, indifferent to our assailing noises, had no existence of its own, it existed only in the sense that it was not the other . . . I realized that as soon as I got off the cart.

“It’s totally deserted here, not a living soul, the entire housie all to ourselves, make the most of life, mainly eating and eating, *Hey brother falcons, give me vigor and brawn*,\* what did I tell you, this little landscape is just like such a falcon, you’ll see later, first a little bite to eat, yum, yum, yum, march, march, *allons enfants de la patrie!*”

“Leon, teaspoons from the bag, Lena, napkins, please, welcome, make yourselves at home, everybody have a seat, wherever it’s comfortable, you, Reverend Father, here, please.” To which they

\*From a Polish patriotic song.



replied: *tout de suite!* Yes Madame, Mrs. major-general! "Well, sit down! Two more chairs. What a banquet! Please, you, Mrs. Lulu, sit here . . . Give me those napkins!"

They took their seats around the big table in the hall, several doors opened into the adjoining rooms, there was a staircase that led to the upper floors. The doors were open, revealing rooms that were totally bare except for a few beds and chairs, lots of chairs. The table was laden with food, spirits were high—more wine anyone?—but the gaiety was of the kind that is created at parties when everyone is jolly just to avoid spoiling the mood for the others, while in fact, everyone is slightly absent, like at a railway station, like waiting for a train—and this absence was connecting with the destitution of this house found by chance, bare, without curtains, wardrobes, bed sheets, drawings, or shelves, with only windows, beds, and chairs. In this emptiness not only words but also persons reverberated loudly. Roly-Poly and Leon in particular were as if inflated in a vacuum and boomed with their persons, while their booming was accompanied by the hubbub of their guests eating heartily, pierced through by the Lulus' giggles, and Fuks, already quite drunk, was acting like an ass, I knew he drank to drown Drozdowski and their mutual wretchedness, his alienation being similar to mine with my parents . . . he, the luckless, the dupe, the irritating civil servant, forced one to shut one's eyes or to look away. Roly-Poly, the magnificent dispenser of salads and sausages, entertaining, entreating, inviting, please, ladies and gentlemen, try this, there's plenty, we won't starve, I guarantee you, and so on, and so on—busily making sure everything was tip-top, with style, well, well, an eccentric sort of expedition, fun and games, no one will be able to say they haven't had enough to eat or drink. And also Leon's doubling and tripling

himself, the Amphitriton, the commander-in-chief, the initiator, hey, hey, all together now, *before our time this forest stood*,\* and *when the Saxon king reigns, loosen your belly's reins*,† *allons, allons!* Oh, how we threw ourselves about, our expletives, the feast's hoopla, yet all of this was not fully present, it was as if undercut by a pale and crippled, rachitic halfheartedness that was weakening us . . . it even seemed to me that at times I saw myself and the others through binoculars, from a distance. Everything as if on the moon . . . So this excursion-escape has led to nothing, the more we tried to detach ourselves the stronger the "other" became . . . enough, let it be, in spite of everything that was happening I began to differentiate between this and that, I noticed a particular ecstasy that affected the Lulus at the sight of honey-couple No. 3, who had arrived with the Wojtyses.

They called the freshly-baked hubby Tolo, or our cavalry captain, or our captain-dearie. Truly, he was every inch a cavalryman, tall, broad-shouldered, with a rosy, seemingly artless complexion, a little blond mustache, a doll of a cavalryman! Leon sang to him, "*there stands Uhlan at his outpost*," but he stopped here, and he was right, since the song continues "*while a heavenly maiden brings him her rose bouquet*"‡—yet his freshly-baked wifie, Venie or Venomie, was of that species of resigned women who don't aspire to be attractive because they know it's simply not for them. God knows why. She wasn't ugly, though her body was a bit boring, I don't know, monotonous, yet in spite of it she had everything more or less "in the right place" as Fuks, nudging me with his elbow, whispered in my ear, and yet the very thought of ca-

\*From a Polish saying.

†From another Polish saying.

‡From a Polish song.

ressing the back of her little neck gave you the creeps, that's how much she wasn't meant for it. Bodily egoism? Physical egocentricity? One sensed that her hands, legs, nose, and ears were only for herself, these were her organs, nothing more, she totally lacked that generosity which knows how to whisper to a woman that her little hand is an alluring and exciting gift. Moral severity? . . . No, no, rather a strange bodily solitude . . . which made Lulu, convulsing with a stifled giggle, whisper to Lukie "she smells OK to herself," yes, that was the basis of her disgusting quality, she was slightly disgusting, like those body odors that are only bearable to the one who emits them. But neither Lukie nor Lulu would have had such a shocking fit, such a convulsive heeheehee, if the hubby-cavalryman were not such a lusty fellow, made for kisses that took their seat right under his little blond mustache, on his red lips—and everyone wondered what could have induced him to wed this particular woman—and the question acquired maliciousness when it became known (Lulu informed me of this in a whisper) that Venomie was the daughter of a rich industrialist. Heeheehee! The scandal, however, did not end here, on the contrary, this is where it began in full swing, because the Toleks had, worse luck (this too was obvious at first sight), no illusions about the effect they were having, and they countered human maliciousness with nothing but the purity of their intentions and the legitimacy of their rights. "Don't I have the right?" she seemed to be saying. "I have the right! I know he's the beautiful one, not I . . . so am I forbidden to love? No! You can't forbid me! Everyone has the right! So I love! I love, and my love is pure and beautiful, look, I have the right not to be ashamed of it—and I'm not ashamed!" On the sidelines, not taking part in the fun and games, she nursed this feeling of hers like a treasure, calm, sedate, with eyes only for her

husband, or for soaking up the green beauty of the flourishing meadows through the window, and her bosom heaved from time to time with a sigh that was almost a prayer. And, because she had the right to, her lips softly formed something like “Tolek,” those lips that were her organ, hers alone. Heeheehee!

“Lulu, oh, oh, I’ll burst!” Then Leon, with a turkey drumstick on a fork and his head bespectacled, went on shouting that he won’t turkey with a turkey, trot, trot, and the priest sat in the corner. Fuks was looking for something, Roly-Poly brought cherries “something fruity to refresh your taste buds, if you please,” yet their noise did not drown the otherwise total silence, solitary, god-forsaken. I was drinking red wine.

Tolek, our captain-dearie, was also drinking. His head high. Actually, he did everything with his head high, letting it be known that no one has the right to doubt his love, to hell with it, as if he didn’t have the right to fall in love with this particular woman and no other, as if this love was not as good as any other! . . . and he surrounded his Venomie with tenderness: “honey, how goes it, aren’t you tired? . . .” and he tried to rise to the heights of her ecstasy, responding to love with love. Yet there was something of the martyr in this and . . . “Lukie, hold me tight, or I’ll burst!” With the faces of innocents the Lulus lay in wait like a pair of tigers on the scent of blood for the Toleks’ every tenderness, and since the poor little priest had, on the horse-cart, provided them with considerable delight, then how much more this little pair, or any young married couple just like them, were made as if to order so that the Lulus could lulu to their hearts’ content!

Roly-Poly with her little torte, please try it, it melts in your mouth, please—but the cat, the cat, oh, oh, the cat, first hanged, then buried under the tree, ah, ah, it was all aimed at the cat, this

party was to blur the cat, that's why they were so sociable, she and Leon! But the cat was stuck in the midst of this. I finally realized: the idea of this trip was awful, they couldn't have thought of anything worse, the remoteness didn't erase anything, on the contrary, it somehow solidified and confirmed it, it even seemed that for years we had lived back there with the sparrow and the cat, then arrived here years later, oh, oh, I was eating the little torte. We should have, as a matter of fact, mounted the cart and gone back, this was exactly what we should have done . . . But if we remain here in relation to the other . . .

I was eating the little torte. I talked with Ludwik and Tolek. I was distracted, how tiresome this abundance, constantly pouring out new people, events, objects, if only the whole stream would stop for once, Lena at the table, probably weary too, her mouth and eyes smiling gently at Lulu (they were both freshly married), the Lena that was here was a faithful reflection of the other Lena, the Lena who was "relating" to Lena (this "relating" was swelling, like before, the other time, like the pounding), there was Fuks, drowning Drozdowski in alcohol, yellowish-red with his swollen ogle eyes, Ludwik, next to Lena, pleasantly sociable and calm, the priest in the corner . . . Lena's hand on the table, next to the fork, the same hand as then, there, and I could have placed my hand on the table . . . but I didn't want to. And yet, in spite of it all, new threads were beginning to form, independent of that other, a new, local dynamic was growing . . . though somehow sick and weakened . . . The functioning of the three young married couples—freshly married—increased the priest's weight and meaning, while the cassock increased the couples' married character, and this created an especially strong matrimonial emphasis, one had the impression that the whole banquet was a wedding reception, yes, wedding

reigned supreme. And the priest. There was the priest, fumbling with his fingers to be sure (he held his hands under the table, pulling them out only to eat) but still a priest who, as a priest, had to become the natural support for the Toleks against the Lulus' devilment; and one must add that the cassock also had an effect on Mrs. Roly-Poly, who was showing (since the cat) a definite inclination toward matters of decency—Roly-Poly eyed the Lulus less and less favorably, more and more emphatically clearing her throat as Leon's guffaws rose and were supported by Fuks's tipsy guffaws and by the rest of our clowning in the void, in a vacuum, at the outer limits of remoteness, in the deadly silence of the mountains' bosom, where something began again to connect, unite, create, but one still didn't know what to latch onto—and so I latched onto this or that, I followed a line that was suggesting itself to me, leaving aside all the rest, huge and voracious—while there, in the house we had left behind, the other continued to exist, motionless.

And suddenly a scene developed that connected me with the cat . . . through the priest . . .

Like the first lightning from a night's dark clouds, it exposed us all in total clarity, in relation to that other. The scene that arose was preceded by some remarks from Roly-Poly such as (to Tolek, very politely) "Mr. Tolek, please brush the sugar off Venomie's blouse" (and to Leon, so that everyone would hear) "See, Leon, the road wasn't that bad, we could easily have come by car, I told you that you should have asked Tadek for the car, I'm sure he wouldn't have refused, he suggested it so many times, he said that it was at our disposal . . ." (to Lulu, tartly) "Heavens, laughs and giggles, but Lulu-dearie isn't eating her little torte, is she." In the meantime Fuks was clearing the plates—unsure whether he wasn't getting

on our nerves (like on Drozdowski's), he tried at least to buy into our graces by gathering our plates—but suddenly he rose, pulled his wry, tipsy, fish-like face into a yawn and said:

“I'd like to have a bath.”

A bath, that was one of Lukie's favorite topics, and Lulu's even more—almost as much as the topic “my mother” had been—on the horse cart we had already learned that “I couldn't live without a shower,” and “I don't know how one can bear it in the city without bathing twice a day,” and “my mother used to bathe in water with lemon juice,” and “well, my mother went to Carlsbad every year.” Thus, when Fuks mentioned a bath, that he'd like to take a bath, Lulu immediately began to lulu, that even in the Sahara she would wash in the last glass of water, “because water for washing is more important than water for drinking, and you, Lukie, wouldn't you like a bath?” and so on . . . but while chirping she must have realized, as I did, that the word “bath” seemed to peek unpleasantly in a certain direction, namely toward Venomie, it was not that she was uncleanly, no, but she had that special quality of bodily egoism which reminded me of Fuks's expression on another occasion “go to your own for whatever turns you on.”\* She somehow treated her body as if it were bearable to herself alone, its owner (as is the case with certain smells), and that was why she gave the impression of a person who had little interest in bathing. Lulu, sniffing with her little nose and noticing that something wafted from that direction, began to carry on: I feel sick if I don't bathe, etc., while Lukie also pitched in his own remarks, and so did Leon, and Fuks, Ludwik, and Lena, as people do at such times, to avoid being accused of indifference toward water. While Venomie and Tolek remained silent.

\*Further development of the onanistic theme.

And under the influence of some of them talking, some keeping quiet, something arose, something like the likelihood of Venomie not bathing . . . why should she, let her go to her own self, just for herself . . .

Something wafted more strongly from her direction—not actually a smell but something unpleasantly personal, like her own juice—and Lulu, like a pointer on to a scent, and with a most innocent little expression on her face, was all sweetness—while Lukie was seconding, jabber, jabber. In God’s truth, Venomie remained, as always, silent, not taking part—except that now her closing herself off was taking on the traits of bathing—but worse than her silence was Tolek’s silence, because Tolek was, one could see, totally at ease with water, most likely an excellent swimmer, so why didn’t he breathe a word? In order not to desert her in her silence?

“Well, that’s like . . .” the priest said.

He fidgeted, as if he were uncomfortable, and then resumed sitting quietly on the little chair—yet his pronouncement that no one had expected created an unusual effect; it broke through the Lulus’ lulu-ing, everyone looked at him. I don’t know whether everyone was under the same impression—that those stubby fingers, the skin reddened by the collar, his bodily uncouthness, all his troubles, splintering and festering, everything, together with the pimple at the base of his nose, united him with Venomie. Venomie with the priest. The blackness of his cassock, his fingers fumbling, her eyes gazing, her trust, her right to love, her awkwardness, her anguish, his torment, her right, his despair, everything, everything, blended together in a clear yet unclear partnership, perceptible and yet not, in their own juice in common “go to your own for your own . . .”



I was eating the little torte. I stopped eating, my throat tightened, with my mouth full I watched . . . the . . . the . . . what would you call it? Turning to within oneself, one's own horror, one's own filth, one's own crimes, closing oneself off, condemned to oneself, oh, egoism! One's very own! And like a flash of lightning: this must lead to the cat, the cat was close, close by . . . and immediately the cat crawled onto me, I felt the cat. I felt the buried cat, the strangled cat—hanged between the sparrow and the stick which were there, immobile and becoming overgrown with their own existence, strained with their own immobility, in an abandoned, forsaken place. What a devilish contrariness! The farther, the closer! The more trivial and nonsensical, the more intrusive and powerful! What a trap, what a hellishly malicious arrangement! What a snare!

The cat, the cat strangled—hanged!

## chapter 8

**L**udwik said drowsily to Lena that it would be good to take a nap. Sure. We deserved a nap after traveling since daybreak. Everyone rose and began looking around for blankets.

“Ti, ri, ri!”

Leon’s little melody. But louder than usual and defiant. Roly-Poly asked him, surprised.

“What is it with you, Leon?”

He sat alone at the table littered with dishes and the remnants of the banquet, his baldness and pince-nez glistened, on his forehead were drops of perspiration.

“Berg!”

“What?”

“Berg!”

“What berg?”

“Berg!”

Not a trace of kindness. Fawn, Caesar, Bacchus, Elagabalus,

Atila. But then Leon smiled in a friendly way from behind his pince-nez.

“*Niczewo*,\* old gal of mine, that’s two Jews talking . . . a joke . . . I’ll tell you some other time . . .”

Everything was ending, falling apart . . . The table deserted, chaotic, chairs being moved, blankets, beds in empty rooms, lan-guor, wine, etc.

Around five o’clock, after my nap, I stepped out in front of the house.

Most of our company was still sleeping—no one there. The meadow dotted with spruces, boulders, sunny, hot, behind me the house filled with sleep, with flies, ahead of me the meadow and farther on the mountains, mountains all around, so mountainous and grown over with forests that they are impossibly forest-like in their deathly silence. It’s not my place, what good is it to me, although I am here, I could just as well be somewhere else, it’s all the same, I knew that beyond the mountain wall there were other, unfamiliar regions, but they were no more foreign to me than this here, a kind of indifference established itself between myself and this landscape which could transform itself into a harshness or even something worse. Into what? In the distinctive narcosis of these meadows and forests rising from the depths, unfamiliar and unenticing, isolated, there was the possibility of a sudden gripping, twisting, strangulation and, ha, ha, of hanging—but this possibility was “beyond,” “beyond it.” I stood in the shade, right in front of the house, among trees. I was picking my teeth with the stem of a blade of grass. Hot, and yet the air was brisk.

I turned around. Five steps away from me was Lena.

\*Russian for “nothing.”

She was standing there. When I noticed her so suddenly she seemed, most of all, small, child-like—and my eyes were struck by her greenish blouse, sleeveless. But this was just a moment. I turned my head, looked the other way.

“Lovely, isn’t it?”

She said this, since she was just five steps away she had to say something. I still didn’t look at her, this non-looking was killing me—had she come to me—to me—does she want to start something with me—this terrified me. I didn’t look, and I had no idea what to do, there was nothing to do, I stood, not looking.

“Have you lost your tongue? Are you in rapture?”

Oh, the tone was a bit lulu-like, she had learned it from them . . .

“Where is Mr. Leon’s panorama?”

I said this to say something . . . Her laughter was quiet, gentle: “How should I know!” Again silence, but no longer so glaring, considering that everything was happening *au ralenti*, it was hot, evening approaching, a pebble, a little beetle, a fly, the earth. As the time for my reply was running out I said, “We’ll soon find out.”

And she replied right away: “Yes, Daddy will take us there after supper.”

Again I said nothing, I looked at the ground in front of me. I and the ground—she to one side. I felt uncomfortable, even bored, I would have preferred to have her leave . . . It was fitting for me to say something again, but before I spoke I glanced in her direction, ever so quickly, and in this barely perceptible moment I see that she is not looking at me either, her gaze, like mine, directed elsewhere—and this mutual non-looking, mine and hers, had the air of an unpleasant debility that had its origins in the distancing, we hadn’t been here long enough, I and she, she and I, we

were as if flung here from somewhere else, from there, sick, not quite here, like those unseeing apparitions in a dream, connected to something else. I wondered if her mouth was still “in relation” to the disgusting slipaway of that lip, there, in the kitchen or in the little room? I had to find out. I glanced but I couldn’t see her mouth well enough, yet I immediately saw that yes, in and of itself, her mouth was with that other mouth, like two cities on a map, like two stars in a constellation; even more so now, at a distance.

“What time are we supposed to set out?”

“Probably around twelve-thirty. I don’t know.”

Why did I do it to her?

Spoiling everything for myself . . . Why did I, then, that first night in the hallway . . . begin . . . (Well, in the beginning our deeds are skittish and capricious, like grasshoppers, but slowly, on returning to them, they acquire a spasmodic nature, like claws clutching, unrelenting—so what can one know?—there, then, in the night, in the hallway when for the first time her mouth had united in my mind with Katasia’s mouth, oh, a whim, a fantasy, a trifle, just a fleeting association! And today? What can one do now, great God, what is to be done? Especially now that I had spoiled her for myself, and to such a degree that to approach her, catch her, spit in her mouth—why did I spoil her for myself like that? It was worse than raping a little girl, it was rape done unto me, I had raped her “for myself,” this phrase appeared to me against the background of the priest, it had the air of sin, I realized that I was in a state of churchy, mortal sin, and this presented me with the cat, and the cat emerged.)

The ground . . . clods of dirt . . . a few inches away two other clods . . . how many? . . . two, three . . . I should take a brief

walk . . . Admittedly the air . . . Another clod of dirt . . . how many inches?

“I took a nap after dinner.”

She said this with the mouth that I knew (I could no longer not know) had been spoiled by the other mouth, her mouth was . . .

“I had a nap too,” I said.

This was not her. She was there, at the house, in the garden with the little whitewashed trees tied to the stakes. I wasn’t here either. But, just because of this, we were a hundred times more significant. As if we were symbols of ourselves. The earth . . . the clods of dirt . . . the grass . . . I knew that *because of the distancing*, I had to take a walk, why am I standing here, *because of the distancing*, the importance of here and today is becoming immense. And decisive. And this immensity, its power, oh, let it be, let’s go! Immen-sity, what kind of a little bird is that, immensity, the sun is sinking, a little walk . . . Since I had strangled the cat—hanged it, I’ll have to strangle her too—hang her . . . for myself.

In the bushes by the road, it, the sparrow, is hanging, and so is the stick hanging in the recess of the wall, they are hanging, but the immobility within this immobility surpasses all boundaries of immobility, one boundary, second boundary, third boundary, it surpasses the fourth, fifth, a sixth pebble, seventh pebble, the little blades of grass . . . it’s already cooler . . . I turned around, she was no longer there, she was gone with her lascivious mouth, and she was somewhere else with her mouth. I went away, i.e., I went away from the place I had been, and I walked over the meadow, in the sun that was already less bothersome—in the silence of the mountains’ bosom. Small inclines in the terrain absorbed me, mostly pebbles in the grass that made walking difficult, what a pity that she is not opposing me, but, on the other hand, how can

someone, for whom talking serves only as a pretext for making sounds, oppose anyone, ha, ha, ha, just like her “giving evidence” at that time, after the killing of the cat, well and good, she’s not opposing me, so there won’t be any opposition. This meeting of ours was so unpleasant, sideways, without looking, as if sightless—more and more blossoms in the grass, blue and yellow, clusters of spruce, pines, the terrain was descending, and I had moved quite far, an incomprehensible matter of otherness and distance, in the silence butterflies fluttering, a breeze blowing gently, earth and grass, forests turning into peaks, a bald patch under a tree, pince-nez—Leon.

He sat on the stump of a tree smoking a cigarette.

“What are you doing here?”

“Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing,” he replied and smiled blissfully.

“What’s so amusing?”

“What? Nothing! Exactly that: nothing! Ha, that’s a language game, if you please, hm . . . I’m amused by ‘nothing,’ mark you, Your Reverence, my venerable companion and merry-maker and horse-drawn carriage, because ‘nothing’ is exactly what we do all our lives. A fellow stands, sits, talks, writes and . . . nothing. A fellow buys, sells, marries, doesn’t marry and—nothing. A fellow sitzium on a stumpium and—nothing. Soda pop.”

He was drawling these words, with nonchalance, condescendingly.

I said: “You talk as if you’ve never worked.”

“Never worked? But I have! Yes indeed! Definitely! At the bankie! The little bankie! From the dumb bankie-dear straight into the stomach! A whale. Hm. Thirty-two years! And what? Nothing!”

He pondered and blew on his hands.

“It’s run through my fingers!”

“What has?”

He replied nasally, monotonously:

“Years disintegrate into months, months into days, days into hours, minutes into seconds, seconds run past. You won’t catch them. Everything runs past. Flies away. Who am I? I am a certain number of seconds—that have run past. The result: nothing. Nothing.”

He flared up and exclaimed: “It’s thievery!” He took off his pince-nez and began to tremble, like a little old man, like one of those indignant little old men one sees at times standing on street corners, or in a trolley, or in front of a cinema, vociferating. Should I talk to him? Say something? But what? I was still lost, not knowing which way to go, to the right, to the left, so many threads, connections, insinuations, if I wanted to enumerate all of them from the very beginning I would be lost, cork, saucer, the trembling of a hand, the chimney, a cloud of objects and matters undeciphered, first one detail then another would link up, dovetail, but then other connections would immediately evolve, other connections—this is what I lived by, as if I were not living, chaos, a pile of garbage, a slurry—I was putting my hand inside a sack of garbage, pulling out whatever turned up, looking to see if it would be suitable for the construction of . . . my little home . . . that was acquiring, poor thing, fantastic shapes . . . and so on without end . . . But what about this Leon? I’ve been wondering for some time why he seems to be circling in my vicinity, even seconding me, there was some similarity, take the fact that he was losing himself in seconds as I was in trifles, well, well, there were also other leads providing food for thought, those bread pellets during supper and other trifles,



the ti-ri-ri, and again, more recently, I don't know why, I fantasized that the disgusting "selfness" ("gratify yourself with yourself . . ."), creeping toward me from the Toleks' and from the priest's direction was also somehow making its way toward Leon. What harm would it do to hint at the sparrow and all the other wonders back home? Put it to him and see what I can see, I was, after all, like a soothsayer, looking into a crystal ball, into smoke.

"You are anxious," I said, "no wonder . . . After the business of these last few days. With the cat . . . trifles seemingly, yet also puzzles, it's hard to shake them off, it's as if they were infested with vermin . . ."

"Kitty-cat, eh? Such a trifling matter, who would bother with the catsqueal of a kittycorpse? Look at that gadfly, brother mine, how it's blaring, the rascal! Only yesterday that kittycarcass was tickling my nervous system with a drilling tickle—but today? Today, with my sky-high gazing at the mountains—oh, my daughters, hey, hey, hey, my only ones?! Granted, I have in my nervous system a kind of celebrating tension, tumtupuli, narambuli, it's festive, delightfully celebratory, festively delightful, hey-ho, it's a festivity, a festivity! A festivity! Haven't you, sir, my dear sir, my dearie little sir, noticed anything?"

"What?"

He pointed his finger at a little flower in his buttonhole. "Please incline your gracious little nose toward me and take a whiff."

Sniff him? This alarmed me more than it probably should have . . .

"Why?" I asked.

"I'm delicately perfumed."

"Did you perfume yourself for your guests?"

I sat on a tree stump, a little distance away. His bald head

formed, with his pince-nez, a glassy-domelike whole. I asked whether he knew the names of the mountains, he didn't know, I asked him the name of the valley, he muttered back that he knew it once but had forgotten.

"What are these mountains to you? Their names. This is not a matter of names."

I was about to ask "then what is it about?" but I held back. Let him tell me himself. Here in this remoteness "*up the summits and down to the fen, Maggie danced with the mountain men!*"\* And yes, when Fuks and I reached that wall, when we discovered the stick, there too it felt like being at the ends of the earth—the smells, very likely of urine, the heat, the wall—and now, here, why ask, it had to begin on its own . . . because, no doubt, a new arrangement is closing in on me, and something will begin to unravel, to connect . . . Better be quiet. I sat as if I were not there.

"Ti, ri, ri."

I was mum. I sat.

"Ti, ri, ri."

Again silence, the meadow, azure, the sun already lower, shadows spreading.

But this time with all his might, as forceful as a battle cry. And suddenly it fell:

"Berg!"

Loud and clear . . . so that I wouldn't be able not to ask what it meant.

"What?"

"Berg!"

"What, berg?"

\*From a Polish folk song.

“Berg!”

“Ah yes, you were saying earlier that two Jews . . . a Jewish joke.”

“Not a joke at all! Berg! Berging with a berg into a berg, mind you—bemberging with a berg . . . Ti, ri, ri,” he added slyly.

He fluttered his hands and even his legs—as if dancing inside himself—triumphantly. Almost inaudibly and from deep within he repeated mechanically, in a hollow tone: berg . . . berg. He fell silent. He waited.

“All right. I’m going for a walk . . .”

“Sit down, sir, why walk in the sun. It’s more pleasant in the shade. It’s pleasant. Such small pleasures—they are the best. Tasty. They taste well.”

“I’ve noticed you like your little pleasures.”

“How’s that? What? I beg your pardon?”

He bubbled with a kind of internal laughter: “On my word of honor, true as blue, you’re thinking about those little games of mine on the tablecloth, under the eyes of my better half? Discretely, all correct, so that there would be no scandals? The main thing is, she doesn’t know . . .”

“What?”

“That it’s the berg. This berging with my bemberg with all the bembergality of this bemberg of mine!”

“OK, fine . . . You rest, I’m going for a walk . . .”

“Where are you going in such a hurry? Hold on for one tiny little minute, maybe I’ll tell you . . .”

“What?”

“That which interests you. What you are curious about . . .”

“You’re a pig. A scumbag.”

Silence. Trees. Shadow. A small meadow. Silence. I said this quietly—what harm? In the worst case he’ll feel offended and turn

me out. So what, this will end, break off, I'll move to another *pension*, or I'll return to Warsaw to irritate my father and bring my mother to a state of despair with my unbearable person . . . Eh, he won't be offended . . . "You're a dirty pig," I said, laying it on. The little meadow. Silence. I was intent on just one thing: that he not go crazy on me. Because my concern was that if he were a maniac, *mente captus*, in that case he would simply lose all importance, and he and all his possible deeds and all his confessions, and my story as well, would become something founded on the indiscriminate folly of a poor idiot and—trivial. Yet by thrusting him into swinishness . . . oh, there I could make use of him, there he could somehow connect himself with Venomie, with the priest, with that cat of mine, with Katasia . . . there he could be useful to me as one more brick in this house of mine, laboriously built at the outer limits.

"Why are you jumping on me?" he asked casually.

"I'm not."

The tranquility of nature.

Anyway, if I had insulted him, it was an insult out there, in the distance . . . almost through a telescope.

"May I ask: by what right?"

"Because you, sir, are a voluptuary."

"Enough! Enough! With your permission, I beg you, if you please, if it pleases the high court, I, Leon Wojtys, an exemplary father of a family, never convicted, working myself to the bone all my life, earning a living, day-in-day-out, except on Sundays, from home to the bankie, from the bankie home, now retired, but nonetheless exemplary, I rise at six fifteen, go to sleep at eleven thirty (unless there is a little game of bridge with my better half's permission), my dear sir, for thirty-seven years of conjugal life I

haven't been, not even once . . . hm, hm . . . to my better half, with any other. I haven't been unfaithful. Not even once. Thirty-seven. Not even once! So there! I am a good husband, tender, tolerant, polite, cheerful, the best father, tenderly loving, pleasant to people, eager, kind, helpful, tell me, if you please sir, what is it in my life that entitles you to say that I, on the side, something or other, taking chances, as if I'd been acting altogether illicitly, drunkenness, cabaret-life, orgy, debauchery, roguery, and whoring with various hussies, perhaps bacchanalia by Chinese lanterns with odalisques, but you can see for yourself, I sit quietly, I chat, and—" he triumphantly shouted into my face, "I'm *correct* and *tutti frutti*!"

*Tutti frutti!* What a scoundrel!

"You, sir, are a masturbator."

"What's that? I beg your pardon? How am I to understand this?"

"Go to your own for whatever turns you on!"

"What do you mean?"

I moved my face close to his face and said:

"Berg!"

It worked. First he rocked back and forth in surprise that this word was coming to him from without. Surprised, even annoyed, he snapped back:

"What do you know?"

But then he immediately shook with inner laughter, he seemed to swell with laughter: "Ha, ha, ha, true, you're right, *berging* with a *berg* doubly, triply, with a particular system of on-the-quiet-*berg*, discrete-*berg* at every hour of the day and night, and most eagerly at the family dinner table, *bemberging* a little under the eyes of my little wifie and my little daughter! *Berg!* *Berg!* You, my good sir, have a sharp eye! However, my dear sir . . ."

He looked grave, pondered, then suddenly remembered some-

thing, he reached into his pocket and held out to me on his palm: a packet of sugar, two or three hard candies—a tine broken from a fork—two indecent photos—a cigarette lighter.

Trifles! . . . Trifles like those clods of dirt, arrows, sticks, sparrows! I was instantly certain that he was the one!

“What’s this?”

“This? Candybergs and penalbergs in the citation of the Highest Tribunal. Penalbergs of the District Penal Department and candybergs of the Delicatessen-Caresses Department. Punishment and reward.”

“Who are you punishing and who are you rewarding?”

“Who?”

He sat stiffly, his arm extended and looked at his hand “for himself”—like the priest who was fumbling with his fingers “for himself,” like Venomie who loved “for herself” . . . and . . . just as I had spoiled everything “for myself” . . . My anxiety that he would turn out to be a madman vanished, I began to see that we were both working on something—and strenuously. Yes, it was hard work, work at a distance, I wiped “for myself” my brow that was actually dry.

The heat, but not so very severe . . .

He wet his finger with saliva and smeared it laboriously across his hand, then watched his fingernail thoughtfully.

“You’re scraping a turnip just for yourself,”\* I remarked.

He laughed with glee, loudly, as if in every direction, he almost danced in his seat: “Oh, yes, oh yes, on my word of honor, I’m scraping it just for myself!”

“So you hanged the sparrow?”

\*From a Polish saying.

“What? Hanged what? The sparrow? No. Nonsense!”

“Who then?”

“How should I know?”

The conversation broke off, I didn’t know if I should rekindle it, here, in this stilled landscape. I began to scrape the dried dirt off my pants. We sat on a log like two councilmen, but it wasn’t clear what the council was about. I said again: “Berg . . .” but more softly, more calmly, and my intuition did not mislead me, he looked at me with respect, brushed something off, mumbled:

“Berg, berg, I see you are quite a bembergman!”

He then asked me matter-of-factly:

“Do you bemberg?”

And he laughed: “My dear fellow! Perchance you, my dearie, know why I have let you in on the bemberg? What is my dear fellow pondering in that little head of his? That little Leo Wojtys is such a simpleton as to let anybody in on the bergum-bergum? You can’t be serious! I let you in on it because . . .?”

“Because of what?”

“You are curiosity incarnate! But yes, I’ll tell you.”

He caught me lightly by the ear—he blew into my ear.

“I’ll tell you! And why shouldn’t I tell you! Because you are berg berg berging yourself into the berg with that daughter of mine, that Miss Wojtys Helena-Lena, sired by me, a Wojtys! With a berg. On the quiet. Do you think I can’t see? You scamp!”

“What?”

“Scoundrel!”

“What do you want?”

“Cool on top but ready to pop! You, sir, are berging my daughter for yourself! With an on-the-sly-berg, with a lovey-doveyberg, and you, my dearie sir, would like to bemberg yourself right under

her skirt and straight into her marriage as the lovieberg number one! Ti-ri-ri! Ti-ri-ri!”

The bark of a tree, knots, veins, so he knew, in any case he guessed . . . so this secret of mine was not a secret . . . but what did he know? How was I to talk to him! Directly, or . . . covertly?

“Berg,” I said.

He looked at me with respect. A swarm of little white butterflies, something like a billowing sphere, flew over the meadow and disappeared beyond the larches by a brook (there was a brook).

“Have you berged? Ha, you’re no fool! I also berg. We’ll bemberg together! With the assurance, eh, that you, comrade, won’t breathe a word, mum’s the word, because if you, siree, blabo to my beloved wifie for example, to my cultiflora, it will mean get out, out of my house, head first, for the lust of conquering the marital bed of this beloved daughter of mine! Catch my meaning. That’s why, because you are regarded as a man worthy of confidence, one determines, according to the Decree b . . . b . . . number 12. 137, to admit you to today’s celebration of my bemberging, most strictly secret, to my berg-festivity together with the flower and the perfume. In other words: do you think, my good fellow, that I dragged you all here merely to admire the scenery?”

“Then why?”

“To celebrate.”

“To celebrate what?”

“An anniversary.”

“Of what?”

He looked at me and said piously, with a strange solicitude: “Of what? Of the greatest fun of my life. Twenty-seven years ago.”

Again he looked at me, and it was the mystical gaze of a holy man, even a martyr. He added.



“With a kitchen maid.”

“With what kitchen maid?”

“With the one who was here at the time. My good sir! Once in my life I got lucky, and how! I carry this delight of mine within myself like the holiest sacrament. Once in my life!”

He fell silent, while I surveyed the surrounding mountains, mountains and mountains, cliffs and cliffs, forest and forest, trees and trees. He wet his finger with saliva, spread it across his hand, watched it. Then he began slowly, starkly, laboriously: “You should know that my early life was nothing special. We lived in a small town, in Sokołowo, my father was the manager of the co-operative, one has to be careful, you see, people know about everyone immediately, so you see, one lives in a small town as if in front of a window, every step, every movement, every glance and you’re on the carpet, good God, I was brought up in plain sight, besides, I admit, I was not known for courage, ha, ha, well, shy, quiet . . . I don’t know . . . of course I would seize this and that, as chance presented itself, I did as well as I could, but what of it. Never enough. Always in plain sight. And then, you see, well, as soon as I joined the bank I got married, and, I don’t know, a little bit, yes, but not much, this and that, we usually lived in small towns, it’s like living in front of a window, everything in full view, and, I’d say, there was even more watching now because, in a marriage, you know, each one watches the other from morning ’til night, from night ’til morning, and you can imagine how it was under my wife’s keen eye, then my child’s, ah, but then, in the bank they’re watching too, at the office I devised the pleasure of deepening a groove in my desk with my fingernail, the division chief comes in, what the devil are you doing with your fingernail, well, too bad, but in any case and as a consequence, you understand,

I had to resort to small pleasures, on the side, nearly invisible, one time, young man, when we lived in Drohobycz, a truly sumptuous actress came to town for a guest performance, a lioness no less, and I accidentally touched her little hand on the bus, so, young man, frenzy, madness, wild excitement, do it again, but it's out of the question, impossible, 'til finally, in my bitterness, I came to my senses, thinking, why should you look for a strange hand, you have two of your own and, would you believe it, with some training one can become such an expert that one hand can feel the other, under the table for instance, no one sees it, and even if they do, so what, one can touch oneself not only with hands, but also with thighs, one can touch the ear with one's finger, because, as it turns out, you see, if your purpose is pleasure, you can find rapture in your own body if you must, not a whole lot I'll admit, but half a loaf is better than none, of course I'd rather make it with some odalisque-houri . . . but if there is none . . .

He rose, took a bow, and sang:

When you haven't got what you love  
Why then you love what you've got.

He took a bow and sat down. "I can't complain, I've gotten something out of life, others get more, but so what, besides, who knows, everyone talks nineteen to the dozen, brags that he's made it with this one, with that one, but in truth it's nothing much, he goes back home, sits down, takes off his shoes and goes to bed alone with himself, so why so much talk, I at least, you see, when one concentrates on oneself and begins to render to oneself small, insignificant little pleasures, not only erotic ones, because you can amuse yourself like a pasha with bread pellets, for example, or by wiping your pince-nez, for about two years I carried on like this,

they keep bothering me with family affairs, the office, politics, while I just keep on with my pince-nez . . . and so, I tell you, what was I going to say, ah yes, you have no idea how one swells to an enormous size from such trifles, you wouldn't believe it, a man grows larger, when the sole of your foot itches it's as if it were happening in Galicia, in the southeasternmost regions, actually one can also get some satisfaction from the itching of the sole, it all depends on your approach, how you formulate the intention, if a corn can be painful, young man, why can't it also provide you with pleasure? How about poking your tongue into the nooks of your teeth? What was I going to say? Epicureanism, rapturism, can be twofold, because *primum* there is the wild boar, the buffalo, the lion, *secundum* the little flea, fly, ergo on a large scale and on a small scale, but if on a small scale, one needs the ability to microscopize, to dosify, to properly apportion and dismember into parts, because the eating of a candy can be divided into stages of *primum* smelling, *secundum* licking, *tertium* inserting, *quatum* playing with your tongue, your saliva, *quintum* spitting it into your hand, looking at it, *sextum* breaking it with the aid your tooth, but let these several steps suffice, as you can see, one can somehow manage without dancing parties, champagne, dinner parties, caviar, décolletages, frufu, pantyhose, panties, busts, preening, tickling hee, hee, hee, wowow, what are you doing to the back of my neck, sir, how dare you, heehee, hahaha, ohohoh, ooh, ooh. I sit at supper, I chat with the family, with the boarders, and I even avail myself of a bit of Parisian *café chantant* quietly on the side. Let them catch me if they can! Ha, ha, ha, they won't catch me! The whole thing depends on sort of making oneself inwardly comfy with fans, with plumes, rapturously and most enjoyably, in the mode of Sultan Selim the Magnificent.

What's important is the artillery discharge. As well as ringing the bells."

He rose, bowed, sang:

When you haven't got what you love  
Why then you love what you've got.

He bowed. He sat down.

"You are probably accusing me in your thoughts of being a loony-ium."

"Somewhat."

"Indeed, do accuse me, this makes it easier. I'm playing a mad-man in order to make it easier. If I didn't make it easier, this whole thing would become too difficult. Do you love fun?"

"I love it."

"So you see, siree, we've somehow come to an understanding. A simple matter. A man . . . loves . . . what? He loves. Lovey-loves. Lovey-loves berg."

"Berg," I responded.

"What?"

"Berg!"

"How so?"

"Berg."

"Enough! Enough! No . . ."

"Berg!"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, you've really bemberged me out; the point is—you're cool on top but ready to pop! Imagine that! You're a real berg-bergman. Bergumberg! Onward! Full speed ahead! And away! Berg-and-away!"

I stared at the ground—staring at the ground again, with its grasses . . . clods of dirt . . . So many billions!

"Lick it!"

"What?"

"Lick it, I tell you, lickieberg . . . or spit yourself into it!"

"What's the matter with you?! What's the matter with you?!" I exclaimed.

"Spit oneself into it with bemberg into bergum!"

The Meadow. Trees. The stump. Coincidences. Chance. Don't panic! It's pure chance that he's talking about this "spitting oneself into" . . . but surely not into her mouth . . . Calm down! He's not talking about me!

"Tonight is the celebration."

"Of what?"

"Tonight is the pilgrimage."

"You are a pious one," I remarked, and he looked at me with the same strange solicitude as before and said ardently yet humbly: "How could I not be pious, piety is ab-so-lute-ly and re-lent-less-ly demanded, even the least little pleasure cannot occur without piety, oh, what am I saying, I don't know, I sometimes get lost as if in a huge monastery, but do understand, all this is the monastic and the holy mass of my rapture, amen, amen, amen."

He rose. He took a bow. He intoned.

*"Ite missa est!"*

He took a bow. Sat down. "The point is," he explained matter-of-factly, "little Leo Wojtys, in his gray life, experienced only one pleasure, I would say, that was perfect . . . and that was twenty-seven years ago with that kitchen maid, from this chalet. Twenty-seven years ago. It's the anniversary. Well, not quite the anniversary, it's a month and three days short. So,"—he bent toward me, "they think that I've dragged them here to admire the scenery. I

brought them here on a pilgrimage to where I and the kitchen maid . . . twenty-seven years ago less one month and three days . . . It's a pilgrimage. Wife, child, son-in-law, priest, Lukies, Toleks, all of them on a pilgrimage to this rapture of mine, to the berg bergum funfunberg, and I'll berg them at midnight all the way to the rock where I berged with her berg bergum berg and into berg! Let them participate! Pilgrimageberg raptureberg, ha, ha, they don't know! You know."

He smiled.

"And you won't tell!"

He smiled.

"Do you bemberg? I too bemberg. We'll bemberg together!"

He smiled.

"Go now, go sir, I must be alone to prepare myself for this holy mass of mine with pious concentration, in solemn recollection and re-creation, a solemn day, a solemn day, hey, the highest solemn day, leave me so that I can purify and prepare myself, by fasting and prayer, for the divine service of my rapture, for the holy fun of my life on that memorable day . . . go, sir! *A rivederci!*"

The meadow, trees, mountains, the sky with the sinking sun.

"And don't think, sir, that I have a screw loose . . . I'm playing a crazy man to make it easier . . . But in truth I am a monk and a bishop. What time is it?"

"It's after six."

Of course the "spitting into" was a coincidence, he couldn't have known that Lena's mouth was within me, he didn't know, but nonetheless it's interesting, the way coincidences happen more often than one would expect, stickiness, the way one thing sticks to another, events, phenomena, they are like those magnetized balls, they search for one another, and when they're close, pam . . .

they unite . . . randomly, as often as not . . . yet, that he had discovered my desire for Lena, well, no wonder, he is no mean expert, but did he hang the sparrow, was the little affair with the arrow, the stick, and perhaps the whiffletree, were they his doing? . . . perhaps . . . yes, he's the one . . . it's interesting, extremely interesting, whether it was he, or not he, it's all the same now, it changes nothing one way or the other, the sparrow and the stick are there . . . with equal power, not weakened in the least, O God, is there nothing one can do? It's interesting, however, extremely interesting, this coincidental connection we share, this strange meshing together, sometimes almost unequivocal, for example that he too . . . admires trivia, his little affairs seem to dovetail with my own, in that case do we have something in common—but what?—is he somehow accompanying me, pushing me, even abducting me . . . At times I have the clear impression that I'm collaborating with him, as in a difficult childbirth—as if we were giving birth to something—wait, wait, but, on the other hand (on the third? how many hands?) let's not forget that “selfness,” or “go to your own for your own self . . .” could the key to the puzzle be right here, the key to what is churning, brewing here, oh, this “gratify yourself with yourself” is rising from him like a wave, and from the priest and from the Toleks—and there is something terribly exhausting about it—and this something is coming toward me like a forest, yes, a forest, we say a “forest,” but what does that mean, how many tiny details, trifles, particles make up a small leaf of a single tree, we say “forest” but this word is made of the unknown, the unfamiliar, the unencompassed. The earth. Clods of dirt. Pebbles. On a clear day you rest among ordinary, everyday things that have been familiar to you since childhood, grass, bushes, a dog (or a cat), a chair, but that changes when you realize that

every object is an enormous army, an inexhaustible swarm. I sat on the stump as if on a suitcase, waiting for a train.

“Tonight is the pilgrimage to the place of this highest and only rapture of mine, twenty-seven years ago, less one month and four days.” I rose. Yet he obviously didn’t want to let me go without giving me the details, and so he was rushing on. “Tonight is the bembergum, celebrated secretly! Views! What views! You are all here to celebrate the celebration of this my Great Turn-On with the kitchen maid, the one I told you about, with the kitchen maid, from the chalet . . . ” he was shouting, I was walking away, the meadow, trees, mountains, shadows like vultures . . .

I walked, the aromatic grasses, yellowing, reddening with little blooms, the scent, the scent that was and was not like the scent at that time there the little garden the wall Fuks and I approaching along the line, the line of the broomstick, we are approaching, we are at the limits of remoteness after crossing the land of the little white trees tied to their stakes, the wasteland, fallow, weeds and rubble . . . and the smell of urine or something, urine in the heat, the stick that was awaiting us in the sickening and sweltering stench to combine later, not right away, later, with the whiffletree, with the whiffletree, among the pieces of junk in the shed warmed by straps of leather, garbage, the door half-open, and the whiffletree that pushed us toward Katasia’s little room and toward the kitchen, the key, window, ivy, where the various poundings led us to Roly-Poly pounding the tree stump, Lena pounding the table, and this pushed me toward the spruce, branches, the jabbing, boughs, I crawl up, and there is the kettle, kettle, kettle, and the kettle threw me onto the cat . . . the cat, the cat! I and the cat, I with the cat, then, there, brr, swinish business, I’ll throw it off . . . I thought about it softly, sleepily, the meadow was lulling me,



I walked slowly, I looked under my feet, I saw the little flowers when suddenly, walking on this level ground, I fell into a trap.

It was a trap made of nothing, it was stupid . . . Two small stones appeared in front of me, one to the right, one to the left, and slightly farther to the left, a coffee-colored patch of soil stood out where ants had pushed up a mound of loose dirt, farther on to the left there was a big root, black, rotten—everything in a line, concealed in the sun, burrowed in the glare, hidden in the light—I was about to walk between the stones, but at the last moment I veered slightly to walk between the stone and the loosened dirt, the deviation was minimal, just a bit, a bit, I could have gone either way . . . and yet the tiny deviation was unjustified and this, I think, disconcerted me . . . so I mechanically veered again, to walk where I had first wanted to, between the stones, but then I encountered an impediment, it was so slight and originated from the fact that after veering twice, my intention to walk between the two stones had already acquired the character of a decision, a small one of course, but a decision nonetheless. This was unjustified, because the perfect indifference of those things in the grass did not entitle me to make a decision, what's the difference whether I go this way or that way, the valley, put to sleep by the forests, numb, was after all like fish dying or the buzzing of a fly, dazed, embalmed. Tranquility. Engrossment, reverie, enraptured listening. I therefore decide to cross between the stones . . . yet the decision became, since the couple of seconds that had just passed, more of a decision, yet how is one to decide when it all comes to the same thing . . . so I hold myself back again. And, infuriated, I move my leg forward again to cross as I had wanted to, between the stone and the loosened mound of dirt, but I realize that if I walk between the stone and the mound after starting three times, it will

no longer be a simple crossing but something more serious . . . so I choose the way between the root and the mound . . . yet I become aware that this would be as if I had been frightened, so I again want to cross between the stone and the mound of dirt, but, to hell with it, what's happening, what is this, I surely won't keep standing here on this level ground, what is this, am I fighting demons, O living God! . . . What is this? What is this? A sunwarmed, sweet sleep wreathed the herbs, the flowers, the mountains, not a single blade budged. I did not move. I stood. But my standing was becoming increasingly irresponsible, even insane, I had no right to stand, this is IMPOSSIBLE, I HAVE TO GO . . . yet I stood. And then, in this immobility, my immobility became identified with the immobility of the bird, there, in the bushes, with the immobility of the arrangement back there, which was motionlessly made motionless by the bird—stick—cat, with that lifeless, unceasing arrangement, where immobility was mounting, just as I was mounting here, on the meadow, in my growing immobility, unable to move . . . Then I moved. Suddenly I knocked off everything inside me, all that inability, and I smoothly crossed, not even realizing which way, because it had no significance, and I thought about something else, that here the sun sets early, because of the mountains. Actually the sun was already low. I walked across the meadow toward the house, whistling, I lit a cigarette, and all that remained, like some unsettled sediment, was a pale remembrance of this affair. Here was the house. No one. Windows, doors, wide open, deserted, I lay down in our room, rested, when I came down again Roly-Poly was puttering in the alcove.

“Where is everybody?” I asked.

“Out for a walk. Would you like some mulled wine?”

She poured some for me, silence ensued—sad, or weary, or re-

signed—neither of us concealed the fact that we either don't want to, or can't, talk. I slowly sipped the mulled wine, she rested against the windowsill, looked through the window, gazed like someone who had come to a stop after a long march. "Mr. Witol," she said, dropping the "d" at the end of my name, which befell her at times of anxiety, "have you ever seen anything like that hussy? Not even to leave a clergyman alone! What do they think, that I'm the madam in a brothel?!" she exclaimed, in a frenzy. "I won't have it! I'll teach them how to behave when they're my guests! And that dandy in knickers is even worse, the world is a horror-show, Mr. Witol, if she would just flirt on her own, but no, they go on the make together, has anyone seen a husband and wife put the make on another man, incredible, he's actually pushing her onto his lap, it's outrageous for a husband to be pushing his own wife onto another man's lap, and during their honeymoon at that, I can't get it through my head that my daughter has such girlfriends, no discipline, no education, and everything out of spite toward Venomie, they're determined to spoil her honeymoon, Mr. Witol, I've seen a lot, but I've never seen anything like it, I won't tolerate such whoring about."

She asked:

"Have you seen Leon?"

"Yes, I met up with him a little while ago, he was sitting on a stump . . ."

I was slowly finishing the wine, and I wanted to say something more, but neither she nor I was up to it, a debility, why talk, indeed we were . . . too far . . . over hills, over dales . . . we were . . . we were somewhere else . . .

And this feeling too was touched by a lack or absence, as if unfelt . . . I put my glass aside, I said something or other, walked away.

Again I walked across the meadow, but this time in the opposite direction—I was looking for them. My hands in my pockets, head down, pondering deeply but without a single thought—as if someone had taken them away. The dale-vaie with its plumes of trees, with its mantle of forests, with humps of mountains, was reaching me mostly from behind, like a rumble, like the roar of a distant cascade, like an event from the Old Testament, or the light of a star. Ahead of me innumerable grasses. I raised my head—lulu-like giggles reached my ears—the company spilled out from behind the trees, eh Lukie, we are thick as thieves, Lulu, let go or I'll poke you, blouses, scarves, hankies, knickers, a disorderly bunch, walking, and when they saw me they began waving, I too was waving.

“Where have you been? Did you get lost or something? We went all the way to the hill . . .” I joined them and walked with them straight into the sun, which, however, was no longer there—it left behind one great nothing, a kind of sunny vacuum marked by intensified glare gleaming from behind a mountain as if from a hidden spring—blazing the purple sky, inwardly radiant, but not giving itself to the earth. I looked around, everything here below had changed, though it was still light—but a germ of indifference appeared, a crowding and abandoning, something like turning the key in a lock, and the mountains, hills, trees, stones were solely unto themselves and signifying their end. Meanwhile the cheerfulness of our little group was cacophonous . . . a sound like that of a cracked windowpane, no one walked with anyone else, everyone separately, the Lulus to one side, she went first, he behind her, with their little faces, yet a little stinger protruded from their cute little faces . . . The hub consisted of Lena with Ludwik and Fuks, a bit farther was Tolek with Venomie, behind them the priest—all

scattered. I thought there were too many of them. What's to be done with them all, I thought anxiously?

. . . and Fuks surprised me, jumping up and down, delighted, shouting: "Mrs. Lena, please come to my rescue!" While Lulu: "Lena, stop helping him, he's not on a honeymoon!" And Fuks: "I'm always on a honeymoon, it's always honeymoon month for me!" Lukie: "Why is he talking about his monthlies, my ears are turning red!"

Lena, laughing just a little . . .

Oh, the honey . . . the sticky honeymoon honey of the three couples . . . changing on Venomie's part into her own "home-made" honey, or "uniquely her own," like certain scents, because indeed "when she smells herself it doesn't bother her," and she doesn't bathe at all, why should she, and even if she did bathe, it would be in all seriousness, for herself, for the sake of hygiene, not for anyone else. The Lulus were attacking Fuks, but of course they had Venomie in mind, he was just a billiard cushion . . . he knew it, but, thrilled that someone was finally pelting him with little jokes, he almost danced in carrot ecstasy, he, Drozdowski's quarry, was now fawning up to them in his wretched joy. While he danced to one side, an innate, disgusting silence kneaded itself on the Toleks' side. At my feet the grass—the grass—consisting of stalks and blades whose individual positions—twists, slants, bends, desolations, crunches, desiccations—loomed before me, flashing, escaping, absorbed as they were by the totality of the grass that breathlessly stretched all the way to the mountains, but already under lock and key, dejected, condemned to itself . . .

We walked slowly. Fuks's laughter was more idiotic than the Lulus' giggles! His idiocy, the unexpected crescendo of his idiocy puzzled me, but the honey puzzled me even more. Honey was on

the rise. It began with the “honeymoon.” But now “honey” (thanks to Venomie) was becoming more and more “self-gratifying” . . . more disgusting . . . To which the priest also contributed . . . with his fingers fumbling . . .

This love-honey, albeit somewhat disgusting, it too had some connection with me. Connections, indeed. Stop connecting—associating—.

Our steps, unhurried, trudging along, led us to an idyllic little stream. Fuks ran up to it, spotted the best place to cross and shouted “this way.” The absence of light penetrated farther and farther into the light that was framed by the forests on the mountain slopes. Lulu called out: “Lukie, have pity on my little shoes, carry me piggy-back, carry me over! Oh oh!”

To which Lukie insolently replied: “Tolek, sir, you carry her over!”

Since Tolek merely coughed, Lukie wiggled his little hips and added with a schoolgirl’s cherubic solemnity: “Upon my word, do me a favor, I’m exhausted, I’m dead on my feet!”

The situation developed as follows: Lulu exclaimed to Lukie: “you’re mean!” She ran up to Tolek, almost dancing, “Mr. Tolek, poor me, my husband has deserted me, have pity on my little shoes!” And she put out her little leg. Lukie: “On my word, Mr. Tolek, one, two, three, what will be will be!” Lulu: “One, two, three!” And she went on pleading to be in his arms. Lukie: “Onward, what will be will be. One, two, three!”

I didn’t watch this too closely, absorbed as I was by the surroundings, by what surrounded and entwined us, at least by the weight of the mountains that from a distance enveloped and clasped us almost sternly, having themselves turned grave with the forests’ reeling and caving in (though high above us there was brightness—yet set apart). In spite of it, I was able to see that the

Lukies are dancing a war dance, the cavalryman does nothing, Fuks is in seventh heaven, Ludwik nothing, the priest stands still, Lena . . . why did I spoil her for myself at that time, that first night, in the hallway, with Katasia's lip, and why, instead of forgetting it the next day, did I return to it, fixing it in my memory? . . . I was curious about one thing, one thing alone interested me, whether the association was merely a whim on my part, or was there really some connection between her mouth and the lip that I subconsciously sensed—but what sort? What sort?

An imperious whim? An act of capricious license? No. I did not feel guilty. It was happening to me, but it wasn't my doing . . . Not at all, why would I have made her more disgusting for myself, when, without her, my life could no longer be harmonious, fresh, alive, only dead, rotten, unnatural, made loathsome without her as she stood here with her charms that I'd rather not be watching. No, it's not that I couldn't love her because of the swinish association with Katasia, that's not the point, it was even worse, I didn't want to love her, I didn't feel like it, and I didn't feel like it because it was as if I had a rash on my body and if, having a rash, I were to glimpse the most wonderful Venus, I also wouldn't feel like it. And I wouldn't even look at her. I didn't feel well, so I didn't feel like it . . . Wait a minute . . . wait a minute . . . so was I the disgusting one, not she? So I was the one who perpetrated the disgust, it was my doing. I won't find out. I'll never guess . . . But wait, wait, "lift her up," Lukie's calves in patterned socks, "lift her, Mr. Tolek, in good fellowship, you are on a honeymoon too!" . . .

And Venomie's voice, deep, from the fullness of her breast, trusting, noble!

"Tolek, please, carry the lady over!"

I looked. Tolek was already placing Lulu on the grass on the

other bank of the little stream, end of the affair, we're walking again, walking slowly on the grass, honey, why honey, honey and the priest's fingers, I walked, as one walks in the night, through a forest where rustles and shadows and shapes, dispersing, mysterious, yet also merging painfully, press hard and encircle at the very edge of a leap and an assault . . . and Leon, what about Leon with his bemerging into the berg? How long will this lurk and circle around us? Where will the beast spring from? On this meadow, surrounded by mountains moving mutely into forsaking and deserting, heaping large deposits of invisibility, clusters of nonexistence, citadels of blindness and muteness, on the meadow a house appeared from behind the trees, it was not home and it existed only because it was not . . . it was not the other one, there, with the system of configurations that contained within itself the hanged bird—the hanging stick—the strangled-hanged-buried cat, where everything was under the supervision and care of Katasia's "affected" mouth that happened perhaps to be in the kitchen, perhaps in the little garden, perhaps on the porch.

The emergence of the other through this house was importunate—and it was also sick, completely and terribly sick—but not only sick, it was also predatory—and I thought, it can't be helped, let it be, this constellation, this form, this configuration and system cannot be overcome, one can neither break away nor work one's way out of it, it's all too much. It is. At this point I simply walked across the meadow, and Ludwik asked me for a razor blade—of course, you're welcome to one!—and (I thought), it is insurmountable because any defense against it, any escape, entangles one all the more, just as if one were to fall into one of those traps where every movement ensnares you further . . . and, who knows, perhaps all this assailed me simply because I was defend-



ing myself against it, yes, who knows, perhaps I became overly frightened when Katasia's lip attached itself in my mind to Lena, and this was the cause of the paroxysm, that first paroxysm that had seized me, and which was the beginning of it all . . . I wondered if my defense preceded the assault? . . . I wasn't sure . . . In any case it was too late now, a polyp had formed along my perimeter, a falsity had arisen between us, and the more I tried to annihilate the polyp the more it asserted itself.

The house ahead of us looked bitten by dusk, to its very core, weakened . . . and the valley was like a false chalice, a poisonous bouquet, filled with powerlessness, the sky was disappearing, curtains were being drawn, closing, resistance was rising, objects were refusing to join in, they were crawling into their burrows, disappearance, disintegration, finality—even though there was still some light—but one was affected by the malicious depravity of vision itself. I smiled because, I thought, darkness can be convenient, while not seeing one can approach, come closer, touch, enfold, embrace, and love to the point of madness, but I didn't feel like it, I didn't feel like doing anything, I had eczema, I was sick, nothing, nothing, just spit, spit into her mouth and nothing.

I did not feel like it.

"Look!" I heard the pig talking to her Dearest, her One-and-Only, quietly yet ardently (even though I didn't look at them I was sure it had to do with the shades of purple on the horizon). "Look," she said sincerely and sublimely with that mouth organ of hers, and right away I heard in a deep baritone, a sincere "I see." So what about the priest? What about this priest with his paws?! What's happening in that quarter?

Near the house Fuks and Lukie challenged each other to a race to the front door.

We went in. Roly-Poly was in the kitchen. Leon leapt out of the next room, holding a towel.

“Ready, get set, mangium,\* scrub me till I shine fiddle-dee-dee, hey mangium yum yum, no time to pee, let’s eat, hey ho, hey brother mountain men, give me a tart, gulp, gulp, old fart, O God, fill us up!”

Ludwik asked once more for the razor blade—and then Leon nudged me, would I loan him my watch, he didn’t trust his. I gave it to him and asked why he was so keen on accuracy, and he whispered back, it must be to the minute! Ludwik returned a moment later and wanted me to also give him a piece of string, but I didn’t have any. I thought: a watch, a razor blade, a piece of string, one person after another asking for something, what is this, was there something brewing from that direction? . . . How many themes could be taking shape at the same time as my own, how many meanings maturing independently of mine—barely emerging, larval, or deformed, or disguised? And, for instance, what’s with the priest?

The table was already partially set, the dusk crawling out of the house had deepened, it was night on the stairs, and yet up in our little room, where Fuks was combing his hair in front of a hand mirror propped against the window frame, there was still some light—nonetheless, the blackness of the forest on the mountain slopes, a couple of miles away, was crawling through the window, like a thief. The trees by the house rustled and a low breeze rose. “Well, it’s just too much, oh brother!” Fuks was meanwhile going on. “Their minds are made up, no doubt about it, you saw it, you

\*Gombrowicz derived the word from the French *manger* and added, as in many other words, the Latin *um*.

have no idea what was happening during our walk, scandalous, but you could bust your gut laughing, whenever they set their sights on somebody, God have mercy, still, I must admit I'm not surprised . . . the worst of it is, that Venomie is so . . . so moved . . . please hold the mirror . . . actually I'm not surprised at Lulu's behavior, the way Venomie treated herself to such a strapping fellow in exchange for her father's money is a bit annoying, and on top of that for her to be going after someone else . . . It's a little embarrassing for Lena, they are her guests after all, they are both her girlfriends, besides, she doesn't know how to cope with it, she's too quiet, and Ludwik is a total zero, a strange guy, I'd say the type to just go about his job, a neatly dressed functionary, how did he come by someone like Lena, that's strange too, well, people choose each other by accident, that's the devil of it, three little honeymoon couples, just let it go, can't stop nastiness from developing, on the other hand, one must admit that too much too soon isn't healthy, I'm not surprised that Lulu was in the mood for revenge . . . She caught Venomie with Lukie, you know . . ."

"What do you mean, caught her?"

"I saw it with my own eyes. During breakfast. I bent down to pick up some matches, and I saw. He had his hand on his knee, while Venomie's hand was right next to it, an inch away, in a position that wasn't quite natural. The rest you can add up for yourself."

"You imagined it."

"It's a fact! I have a nose for such things. Lulu must have guessed it too . . . I could tell by the expression on her face . . . So now, she and Lukie are both furious at her . . ."

I didn't want to argue, it was too much for me, how could it be, and yet why not, could Venomie be like that, why couldn't Venomie be like that, oh, surely if push came to shove a thousand rea-

sons could be found to account for her being exactly like that . . . yet why couldn't Fuks be mistaken, he must have imagined it . . . perhaps he was fabricating it for reasons unknown to me . . . I was sick, I was sick, I was sick. And I was afraid that hands were resonating and exerting their pressure, fear made my own hand contract. So many dangers! Meanwhile he chattered on, he was changing his shirt, sticking out his carrotty head, he gabbed in his carrotty way, the sky was sinking into nothing, and downstairs Leon "wifie feedie daddie, dee, dee!" I asked sharply.

"And Drozdowski?"

He became morose.

"Hell! You're reminding me, you bastard! As soon as I realize that in a few more days I'll have that wretch Drozda in front of me, for eight hours, eight hours with that duffer, that man makes me puke, I don't understand his talent for irritating me . . . if you could only see how he sticks out his leg . . . Puke! But what of it, *carpe diem*, it's a righty riot, so snappy to it, as Leonum says, whatever fun there is, it's mine, am I right or wrong?"

From downstairs Roly-Poly's voice "please come to the table, have a snack"—a wooden voice, even stony. The wall by the window that I had in front of me was, like all walls, quite varied . . . little veins and a round red dot, two scratches, a flake, little threads disappearing, not much, yet it was there, accumulated over the years and, sinking into this net, I asked Fuks about Katasia, I'm wondering what Katasia is up to and whether anything new has happened, what do you think? I listened intently to my own question . . .

"Why should anything have happened there! Do you want to know what I think? In my opinion, nothing at all would have happened if we weren't so bored during our holiday at the Wojtyses.

The eyes of boredom, old buddy, are bigger than those of fear! When you're bored, God only knows what you might imagine! Let's go!" . . . It was almost black downstairs, but mostly cramped, the alcove was awkward, and on top of that, the table had to be in the corner because there were two benches recessed into the walls, some of the company were already getting settled there—giggling, of course, "it's dark and cramped, just right for little honeymoon couples," suddenly Roly-Poly brought two kerosene lamps, creating something like a sediment of light. After a moment, when one was placed on a shelf and the other on the cupboard, the light improved, and as we sat around the table the slanting rays transformed our corporeality into gigantic beings, making it all fantastic, trembling clouds of enormous shadows brushed the wall, the radiance brought sharply to the surface segments of faces and torsos, all else vanished, the crowding and cramping intensified, it was a thicket, yes, it was thick and becoming thicker, and amidst hands, sleeve, necks expanding and becoming more powerful, everyone was reaching for the meat, vodka was being poured, and there loomed the possibility of a phantasmagoria with hippopotami. With mastodons. The lamps also brought out the thickening of the darkness outside, and its wildness. I sat next to Lulu, Lena was sitting between Venomie and Fuks, and farther away, on the other side, in a fantastic spectacle, heads were uniting, a branching of hands stretching to the platter merged on the wall. There was no lack of appetite, they helped themselves to ham, veal, roast beef, the mustard was circulating. I was hungry too, spit into the mouth though, spitting got in the way of my eating. And the honey. I was poisoned, along with my appetite. Venomie ecstatically allowed Tolek to serve her various salads, and I wracked my brains whether it was possible that she

could be not only the way I thought of her but also as Fuks had said, this was not impossible, she could have been like that, with the organ of her mouth and with her ecstasy, because everything is always possible, and in the billions of possible causes there will always be justification for every combination, and the priest, what about the priest who said nothing, eating something or other as if it were merely noodles, or gruel, he ate listlessly, and the manner of feeding himself was like that of a poor peasant, meager and in some way crushed underfoot, like a bug (but I didn't know, I didn't know anything that well, I was looking at the ceiling), so what about the priest, was there something forming in that quarter? I was eating well enough, though with disgust, but it was I who was disgusting, not the veal, what a pity that by spoiling I spoiled things, I spoiled everything for myself . . . yet I wasn't too worried, what could have worried me, being so distant? Leon also ate as if at a distance. He sat in a corner where the benches joined, his pince-nez protruded and glistened like two drops below the dome of his skull, his countenance hung over his plate, he cut the bread and ham into small pieces, and his procedure of impaling them on his fork began, lifting them to his mouth, shoving them in, savoring, chewing, and swallowing, it took a long time for him to be done with each morsel. Strange, he was silent, and that's probably why hardly anyone else at the table said anything, they just tucked in. He gratified himself by eating. He masturbated by eating, which was rather tiresome, especially since Venomie's satiating herself by the side of her cavalryman, though not similar, was similar ("gratify yourself with yourself"), and besides her eating there was also the priest's eating, chewing like a peasant, befouled by something. And "eating" was connected to "mouth," and in spite of it all, "mouth" began anew, spit into the mouth, spit into

the mouth . . . I was eating, even with appetite, but my appetite was a rather awful evidence that I had become at home with that spitting of mine, yet that terror did not terrify me, it was remote . . .

I was eating the cold veal and the salad. Vodka.

"The eleventh."

"The eleventh is on Tuesday."

" . . . silver-plated fixtures underneath, not bad . . . "

" . . . to the Red Cross, but they said . . . "

Chitchat. Miscellaneous words, here, there, "or little nuts, the salty ones," "why not, have some and be done with it," "the law moves on, relentlessly," "whose?" "last night" . . . the thicket grew, and, I thought, the thicket is rolling on unceasingly, I was in a rolling swarm where something constantly surfaced, who could remember, grasp, so much, so much, from the very beginning, the iron bed, but the bed on which she lay with her legs was somehow missing, lost along the way, then farther on the cork, for instance, the little piece of cork in the dining room, the cork had also somehow disappeared, then the pounding, or Roly-Poly's countess for instance, the chicken that Ludwik had mentioned, the ashtray with the mesh, or even the stairs, yes, the stairs, the little window, the chimney and the drainpipe, my God, the odds and ends under the whiffletree, and next to that, great God, the fork, the knife and the hand, and the hands, her hand, my hand, or ti-ri-ri, great God, Fuks, all that with Fuks, the sun for instance, through the hole in the window shade, or our moving, for instance, along the line of the broomstick, the little stakes, or our moving along the road in the sweltering heat, O God, O God, all the tiredness, the smells, finishing one's tea . . . and how Roly-Poly was saying "my daughter," O God, penetrating behind that root, I don't know, the soap in Katasia's little room, a piece of soap, or the

kettle, her gaze withdrawing, mimosa-like, the wicker gate, the details on the gate with the lock, with the padlock, great God, merciful God, all that by the window, in the ivy, or switching the light off, for instance, then, in her room, the branches, my climbing down, or even the priest on the road, and those imaginary lines, those extensions, O God, O God, the suspended bird, Fuks taking off his shoes, and his interrogating us in the dining room, stupid, stupid, also our departure, the house with Katasia, or the porch and the doors that first time, the sweltering heat, and the fact that Ludwik worked in an office, or the position of the kitchen in relation to the house, a yellowish pebble, and the key to the little room, or the frog, what about the frog, where had it been mislaid, part of the damaged ceiling, and those ants, there, by the second tree, by the road, and the corner we went behind, O God, O God, *Kyrie eleison*, *Christe eleison*, there, the tree on the promontory, and that spot behind the cupboard, and my father, the troubles with my father, the wires of the hot fence, *Kyrie eleison* . . .

Leon lifted a little salt to his mouth on his finger, placed it on his tongue, stuck out his tongue . . .

“ . . . they were forced to keep brushing it away until they” . . . “the regions of the Bystrzyca River” . . . “on the second floor, actually” . . . a congestion of words like the congestion on the dirty wallpaper . . . on the ceiling . . .

He finished eating and sat with his face fastened to his domed skull . . . that face as if suspended from the skull . . . They probably talked so much because he was silent. His silence was creating a gap.

He pressed the salt with his finger so that it would stick, and he raised his finger—watched it—stuck out his tongue—touched the finger with his tongue—closed his mouth—savored it.



Venomie was impaling slices of cucumber on a fork. She wasn't saying anything.

The priest, bent over, with his hands under the table. The cassock.

Lena. Sits quietly, meanwhile a phase of minor activities came upon her, she straightened the napkin, moved a glass, brushed something off, pushed a glass toward Fuks and smiled.

Lukie jumped up: "Wham!"

Roly-Poly enters, she stood a moment, pudgy, looked at the table, returned to the kitchen.

I'm noting facts. These facts and no others. Why these? I look at the wall. Little dots, eczema. Something is emerging, like a figure. No, the figure disappears, it's disappeared, there is chaos and dirty excess, something about the priest, what's happening with Fuks, the honey and Venomie, where is Ludwik (because Ludwik wasn't here, he did not come to supper, I thought he was shaving, I was going to ask Lena, but I didn't ask), what about the mountain folk who brought us here? Entanglement. What can one know? Suddenly, boom, it strikes me, just like it did there, outside, outdoors, the terrain with all its variations all the way to the mountains and farther, beyond the mountains, the highway winding in the night, painful, oppressive, why did I strangle the cat? Why did I strangle the cat?

Leon lifted his eyelids and, though lost in thought, looked at me attentively, straining even—and reached for a glass of wine, raised it to his mouth.

This labor of his, his attention, affected me too. I raised my glass to my mouth. I drank.

His eyebrows twitched.

I lowered my eyelids.

"To our bachelorhood!" "You monster, how dare you, what

bachelorhood is there on a honeymoon!” “Alright, so to our ex-bachelorhood!” “Pour him something, let him drown his sorrows!” “Lukie, what are you up to!” “Lulu, what are you up to!”

His pince-nez glistening under his skull, Leon stretched his finger, stuck a little salt on it, shoved it into his mouth—kept it in his mouth.

Venomie raised her glass to her mouth.

The priest emitted a rather strange, gurgling, sound. He moved.

A small window . . . with a latch.

I drank.

His eyebrows twitched.

I lowered my eyelids.

“My dear Mr. Leon, why are you so pensive?”

“My dear Mr. Leon, what are you thinking?”

The Lulus. Then Roly-Poly asked:

“Leon, what are you thinking?”

She asked this fearfully, standing in the door to the kitchen, her hands by her side, she did not want to hide her terror, she asked as if she were injecting fear into us with a syringe, while I thought, I thought most deeply, most intensely, but without the slightest thought.

Leon commented as an aside: “She’s asking what I’m thinking.”

Honey.

The tip of his tongue appeared in the groove of his thin lips, his tongue was pink, it remained between his lips, the tongue of an older man in pince-nez, the tongue, spit into the mouth, in the lightning-fast chaos and whirl Lena’s mouth together with Katsia’s mouth came to the surface, it was a moment, I saw them on the very surface, the way one sees pieces of paper in the seething cauldron of a waterfall . . . it passed.

I caught a leg of the table with my hand so that the rapidity of it all wouldn't carry me off. A belated gesture. Rhetorical actually. Humbug.

The priest.

Roly-Poly nothing. Leon. Lulu said a little tearfully, My dear Mr. Leon, what about this excursion? What for? At night, in the dark? What kind of landscape are we supposed to see?

"You can't see much in the dark," Fuks interjected impatiently, rather impolitely.

"My wife," Leon said (he's going to say it, while the bird and the stick are there!), "my wife," he added (Jesus, Mary!), "my wife" (I caught myself by the hand!) . . .

"Oh please, don't be so nervosum!" he exclaimed jovially. "There is no reason for this nervipissum! Every little thing is *en ordre, bitte*, here we are, sitting as God decreed, everyone on his little bum, we're biting into God's gifts, as well as gurgle gurgle gurgle, with schnapps and wine-ho, and within the hour we'll march-ho, under my command, to the one and only delight where the miracle of the pan-o-ram-a opens up, as I said, because of the prancing moonlit miracle, hop tra-la-la among hills, little mountains, mountains, open spaces, valleys, hey-ho, oh, hey-ho . . . as it appeared to me, my dears, twenty and seven years ago, less one month and four days when I accidentally at that exact hour of the night strayed into the one and only place and saw . . .

"To suck," he added and turned pale. Short of breath.

"Clouds are coming," Lukie said harshly, unpleasantly—"we won't be able to see anything, there are clouds, the night will be dark, we won't see anything."

"Clouds," Leon mumbled, "clouds . . . That's good. At that time too . . . a bit cloudy. I remember. I noticed it as I was returning. I

remember!” he exclaimed impatiently, as if he were in a hurry and was immediately lost in thought . . .

As for me, I also thought . . . unceasingly and with all my might. Roly-Poly (who had since gone to the kitchen) again stood in the door.

“Careful, your sleeve!”

I jumped sideways at these words of his, frightened—the sleeve, the sleeve!—but he was saying this to Fuks whose sleeve was brushing against a dish of mayonnaise. Nothing much. Peace. Why isn’t Ludwik here, what’s become of him, why is she without Ludwik?

The sparrow.

The stick.

The cat.

“My wife doesn’t trust me.”

He looked in turn at three fingers of his right hand, beginning with the index finger.

“Ladies and gentlemen, my wife would like to know what I’m thinking.”

He moved his three fingers in the air, while I instantly intertwined the fingers of both my hands.

“Ladies and gentlemen, perhaps it pains me to some degree, hm, that my wife, after thirty-seven years of unblemished conjugal life, is anxiously asking for my thoughts.”

The priest said, “may I please have some cheese,” everyone looked at him, he repeated, “may I please have some cheese,” Lukie passed him the cheese, but instead of cutting himself a piece, the priest added, “perhaps we can move the table a bit, it’s cramped here.”

“We could move the table,” Leon said. “What was I saying, about what? Ah yes, I was saying that I did not deserve, after years of conjugal life that was impeccable

irreproachable  
exemplary  
dutiful  
loyal . . .

Because it's been so many years! Years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, seconds . . . Do you know, gentlemen that, pen in hand, I've calculated how many seconds of conjugal life I have had, including leap years, and it came to one hundred and fourteen million, nine hundred and twelve thousand, nine hundred and eighty four, no more no less, until half past seven in the evening of this very day. And now, at eight, a few thousand more have accrued."

He rose and sang:

If you haven't got what you love  
Why then you love what you've got!

He sat down. Lost himself in thought.

"If you want to move the table . . . What was I saying? About what? Ah, yes. So many seconds under my wife and daughter's watchful gaze, and yet, alas, who would have thought

who would have thought

who would have thought

who would have thought

my wife seems not to trust my thoughts!"

He again became lost in thought, broke off. His musings were ill-timed, there was a feeling of violent chaos in general, disorder, or something like that, perhaps not just in this speech of his, perhaps it was in everything, in the totality of everything . . . again . . . again . . . while he, on the other hand, was celebrating. The sparrow. The stick. The cat. This is not the point. So this is the point.

This is not the point. So this is the point. He was celebrating as if it were a litany, a religious service, “look with what attention I devote myself to inattention . . .

“My wife does not trust my thoughts, here, here, do I deserve this? Probably not, let us admit, yet it’s true (move the table away, it’s cramping me too, the seat’s hard but that can’t be helped), yet it’s true, one must admit, in such cases one really doesn’t know, because who can really know what thoughts are in someone else’s head . . . Take this example. For example I, an exemplary husband and father, take into my hand, let’s say, this small piece of an eggshell . . .”

He took a piece of shell between his fingers.

“And I hold it in my fingers like this . . . and I turn it like this . . . slowly . . . in front of your eyes . . . It’s something innocent harmless

not in anyone’s way.

In a word, a trifling *passe-temps*. Well yes, but the question arises: how am I turning it? . . . Because in the long run, mark you, I could be turning it innocently, virtuously . . . but, if I please, I could also . . . what? . . . If I wanted to, I could turn it slightly more . . . hm . . . What? A little. I’m saying this, of course, as an example, to show that the most respectable husband possibly could, under the eye of his better half, turn this piece of shell in a manner that is . . .”

He blushed. Unbelievable: he turned red! Unheard of! He knew it, he even half-shut his eyes, but he didn’t hide it, indeed, he was solemnly exposing his embarrassment in full view. Like the monstrosity.

He waited until the blush faded. All the while turning the piece of shell. Finally he opened his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. He said:

“So, whatever.”

Everyone relaxed . . . though actually, the congestion in our corner, with the lamps, was still quite jumpy . . . yet at the same time heavy, it seemed . . . They watched him, they surely thought he was a bit crazy . . . And yet no one said anything.

Outside, somewhere behind the house something clattered, as if something were falling . . . what? It was an extra sound, super-numerary, it absorbed me, I thought about it for a long time, deeply—but I didn’t know what to think, how to think.

“Berg.”

He said it calmly and politely, carefully.

I said no less politely and clearly.

“Berg.”

He looked at me briefly, lowered his eyelids. We both sat quietly, listening to the word “berg” . . . as if it were a subterranean reptile, one of those that never make their way into the light . . . and now it was here, in front of everyone. They watched it, I suppose . . . I suddenly imagined that everything was moving forward, like a deluge, an avalanche, a march under banners, that a definitive blow had fallen, a push that gave direction! Slap-bang! March! Onward! Let’s move on! If he were the only one who said “berg,” well, it wouldn’t have been a big deal. But I too said “berg.” And my berg uniting with his berg (confidential, private) removed his berg from the realm of confidentiality. This was no longer the private little world of an eccentric. This was truly something . . . this was something that really existed! Right in front of us, here. And it suddenly shot up with full strength, pushed into, made one surrender to it . . .

For a moment I saw the sparrow, the stick, the cat, together with the mouth . . . like trash in the seething cauldron of a waterfall—then vanishing. I expected everything to move forward in the

mode of the berg. I was an officer of the Commander-in-Chief. A boy serving at mass. A humble and well-disciplined acolyte and performer. Onward! Let's move on! March!

But then Lulu exclaimed: "Bravo, Mr. Leon!"

She had left me out. Yet I was sure that she exclaimed it simply out of fear, unable to endure cooperating with him. Suddenly everything fell apart, then flagged, there was tittering, everyone began talking, and Leon laughed uproariously hohohoo, where is the mommy flaskie, take a leakie, bib the cognac, pootoomu bataclee! How unpleasant and discouraging it is that, after such a lofty moment, when the course of events prepares to leap, disintegration and laxity ensue, the humming of the swarm returns, of the swarm, give me some vodka too, you're not drinking, Madame, a drop of cognac, the priest, Venomie, Tolek, Lukie, Lulu, Fuks, and Lena with her beautifully sculptured mouth, fresh, a bunch of sightseers. Everything slumped. Nothing. Everything became like the dirty wall again. Chaos.

Sparrow.

Stick.

Cat.

I reminded myself of them because I was in the process of forgetting them. They returned to me because they were departing. Disappearing. Yes indeed, I had to search within for the sparrow and the stick and the cat, already disappearing, to search for them and sustain them within me! And I had to force myself to look there again with my thought, into the thicket, beyond the road, by the wall.

The priest began to clamber up from the bench, mumbling excuses, he moved along the table, his cassock crawled onto the room. He opened the door. He went out on the porch.



I, without the berg, felt awkward. I didn't know, what . . . I thought: I'll go out too. To breathe fresh air.

I rose. I took a few steps toward the door.

I went out.

On the porch—refreshing air. The moon. Clouds gathering, brilliant, luminously-craggy, and below a much darker surge of mountains, turned into stone while gushing forth. And all around a fairy-like spectacle, meadows, carpets, lawns swarming with clusters of trees, processions, garden parties, as if this were a park where pageants, parades, games were taking place, everything drowned at the very bottom of the moon's glow.

Near the stairs, resting on the handrail, stood the priest.

He stood and he was doing something strange with his mouth.

## chapter 9

**I**t will be difficult to continue this story of mine. I don't even know if it is a story. It is difficult to call this a story, this constant . . . clustering and falling apart . . . of elements . . .

When I walked out on the porch and saw the priest doing something strange with his mouth I was stunned! What? What? I was even more stunned than if the earth's crust had cracked and larvae came crawling from underground to the surface. It's no joke! I alone knew the secret of the mouth. No one besides me had been introduced to the secret affair of Lena's mouth. He had no right to know it! It was mine! By what right was he sticking his mouth into my secret?!

It soon became clear that he was vomiting. He was vomiting. His vomiting, unsightly, wretched, was justified.

He had drunk too much.

Well! It's nothing!

He saw me and smiled, mortified. I wanted to tell him to go lie down and get some sleep, then someone else stepped onto the porch.

Venomie. She walked past me, walked a few steps away and out onto the meadow, stopped, lifted her hand to her mouth and, by the light of the moon, I saw her vomiting mouth, she was vomiting.

She was vomiting. Her mouth, as I saw it, had reason to vomit—which is why I looked—since the priest was vomiting, why shouldn't she be vomiting? Yes? Indeed. Good. But. But, but, but, if the priest was vomiting, she should not have been vomiting! This mouth of hers intensified the priest's mouth . . . as the hanging of the stick had intensified the hanging of the sparrow——just as the hanging of the cat had intensified the hanging of the stick—as the banging-into had led to the pounding—just as I had intensified the berg with my berg.

Why had their vomiting mouths assailed me? What did these mouths know about the mouth that I was hiding within me? Where did the reptile mouth, slithering, come from? Perhaps it would be best—to leave. I left. Not into the house, I went across the meadow, enough was enough, the night was poisoned by the moon drifting across it, dead, the tops of trees were in their glory, and there were innumerable groups, processions, gatherings, murmurings, deliberations, parties—a night truly inducing one to dream. Never to return, never to return, I would most willingly never return, perhaps take the cart, give the horses the whip, leave forever . . . Well, no . . . A splendid night. In spite of it all, I'm having fun. A magnificent night. Yet it was impossible to prolong it, I really am sick. A magnificent night. I'm sick, sick, but not all that sick. The house disappeared behind the hill, I walked on the soft grass alongside the stream, but what about this tree, what kind of a tree is this, what about this tree . . .

I stopped. A stand of trees, and within it one tree was different from the others, that is, actually, it was like the others, but there

must have been a reason why it attracted my attention. This tree was barely visible within the copse, screened by the others, yet it attracted my attention, what, what was it, a thickness, or a weight, a ballast, I was passing it with the feeling of passing a tree that is “too heavy,” terribly “heavy” . . . I stopped, turned back.

I walked into the copse, now quite sure that something is there. The copse began with a few scattered birches, and right after that there was a concentration of pines, thicker, darker. The sensation of walking toward an oppressive “heaviness” did not leave me.

I looked around.

A shoe.

A leg was hanging down from a pine tree. I thought “a leg,” but I wasn’t sure . . . Another leg. There was a man . . . hanged . . . I looked, a man . . . legs, shoes, higher up I could make out a head, askew, the rest merged into the tree, into the dark branches . . .

I looked around, nothing, silence, calm, I looked again. A hanging man. The yellow shoe was familiar to me, it reminded me of Ludwik’s shoes. I pushed the branches away, I saw Ludwik’s jacket, and his face. Ludwik.

Ludwik.

Ludwik, hanging on a belt. His own, pulled from his pants.

Ludwik? Ludwik. He was hanging. I took my time getting used to it . . . He was hanging. I went on getting used to it—he was hanging. Since he was hanging, it must have happened somehow, and I slowly began to search my mind, try to figure it out, he’s hanged, who had hanged him, did he hang himself, when I saw him just before supper, he was asking me for a razor blade, he was calm, he was his usual self on our walk . . . and yet he was hanging . . . and it happened in the span of just over an hour . . . he was hanging . . . and somehow it must have happened, there must

have been reasons, but I couldn't think of them, nothing, nothing, and yet a vortex must have formed in a river flowing by it all, about which I knew nothing, an obstruction must have arisen, some associations, interconnections must have formed . . . Ludwik! Why Ludwik? Leon more likely, the priest, Venomie maybe, even Lena—but Ludwik! And yet this FACT was hanging, a hanging fact, a Ludwik-like fact was hanging, hitting one on the head, a fact that was big, heavy, hanging down, something like a bull roaming about on the loose, an enormous fact on a pine tree, and with shoes . . .

Some time ago a dentist was going to extract my tooth, but he couldn't get hold of it with his pliers, I don't know why they kept slipping off . . . it was the same with this heavily hanging fact, I couldn't get hold of it, it kept slipping away, I was helpless, I had no access to it, sure, it happened somehow, since it happened . . . I carefully looked around in all directions. I calmed down. Probably because I finally understood . . .

Ludwik.

Sparrow.

Indeed, I was looking at this hanging man just as I had looked in those bushes at the sparrow.

And pam, pam, pam, pam! One, two, three, four! The hanged sparrow, the hanging stick, the strangled-hanged cat, Ludwik hanged. How neatly it fit together! What consistency! A stupid corpse was becoming a logical corpse—though the logic was both heavy-handed . . . and too much my own . . . personal . . . so . . . separate . . . private.

I had nothing left but to think. I thought. In spite of everything I strained to turn it into a readable story and—I thought—what if he were the one who had hanged the sparrow? He drew the ar-

rows, hanged the stick, indulged in these pranks . . . some kind of mania, the mania of hanging that led him here, to hang himself . . . what a maniac! I remembered Leon telling me when we sat on the tree stump, in all honesty: that he, Leon, had nothing to do with it. So was it Ludwik? Mania, obsession, lunacy . . .

But there was another possibility, also along the lines of normal logic—that he was the victim of blackmail, revenge perhaps, someone persecuting him, someone surrounding him with those signs, suggesting the idea of hanging . . . but who then? Someone at home? Roly-Poly? Leon? Lena? Katasia?

Yet another possibility, also “normal”: perhaps he didn’t hang himself? Perhaps someone murdered him? Perhaps he was strangled, then hanged? Someone who was amusing himself by hanging odds and ends, a maniac, a lunatic, was finally seized by the desire to hang something heavier than a small stick . . . Who? Leon? Katasia? But Katasia had stayed back there . . . So what? She *could* have come here unbeknownst to anyone, for a thousand reasons, by a thousand means, why not, it could have happened, there were unlimited possibilities of associations and combinations . . . And Fuks? *Couldn’t* Fuks have caught the contagion of hanging, made it his own . . . and . . . and . . . He could have. Yet he was with us the whole time. So what? If it turned out that it was he—an interval in time could be found, anything can be found in a bottomless cauldron of evolving events! And the priest? Millions and millions of threads could connect his fingers with this hanging man . . .

They could . . . And what about the mountain men? Where are the mountain men who brought us here? I smiled in the moonlight at the docile thought of the mind’s helplessness in the face of overwhelming, confounding, entangling reality . . . No combination is impossible . . . Any combination is possible . . .

Yes, but the threads of connections were fragile . . . fragile . . . and here was this hanging person, a brutal corpse! And its hanging brutality, pam, pam, pam, pam, was skillfully uniting with pam, pam, pam, pam, sparrow—stick—cat, it was like a, b, c, d, like one, two, three, four! What skill! What zeal for logic, and yet a subterranean one! Clear evidence, hitting one in the eye, yet subterranean.

But this subterranean logic, hitting one in the eye, pam, pam, pam, pam, would dissolve and evanesce, as if in a fog (I thought), if one were to submit it to the discipline of ordinary logic. I had discussed it with Fuks so many times! Can one speak about a logical connection between a sparrow and a stick, united by the barely visible arrow on the ceiling in our room—so indistinct that we had discovered it by pure chance—so indistinct that we actually had to complete it, to finish drawing it in our imagination? Discovering the arrow, reaching the stick—it was like finding a needle in a haystack! Who could have—Ludwik or anyone else—constructed a net of such evanescent signs?

And what was the connection of the sparrow and the stick with the cat, since *I myself* had hanged the cat? Pam pam, pam, sparrow, stick, cat, three hangings? True, three, but the third had originated from me, the third rhyme I had set up myself.

Chimera. A delusion. Yes!—yet the hanging man hung pam, pam, pam, pam, a, b, c, d, one, two, three, four! I wanted to come closer and possibly touch him, but I stepped back a bit. Even this slight movement frightened me, as if moving in the presence of a corpse were something ill-advised and undesirable. The ghastliness of my situation—because it was indeed ghastly—lay in the fact that I was here in relation to him exactly in the same way as back there, in relation to the sparrow. Bushes and bushes. A hang-

ing man and a hanging bird. I looked around . . . What a scene! Mountains thrusting themselves lifelessly into the smooth sheet of the sky, arrayed for the greater part with centaurs, swans, ships, lions with luminous manes, and down below a Scheherezade of meadows and bouquets enmeshed in trembling whiteness, oh, a dead globe, shining with a borrowed light—and this secondary, weakened radiance, nocturnal, was both defiling and poisonous, like a sickness. And the constellations of stars were unreal, invented, imposed, an obsession of the luminous skies!

But it was not the moon that was the central corpse, it was Ludwik—a corpse on a tree, like a cat carcass on a wall! Pam, pam, pam, pam, pam . . . (magnified by the distant pulsation of that other night, when the driving-in of needles turned into the pounding with the hammer). I moved as if to leave—but not so fast!—the time for it has not yet come . . .

What am I to do? The wisest thing . . . pretend that one hasn't seen anything, leave the matter to run its own course . . . why should I meddle? That's what I was pondering when the mouths came to mind. The mouths came to mind rather indistinctly, Lena's lip smacking mouth, the vomiting mouths, Katasia, Lena, all the mouths, not much, just a bit. Yet they assailed me. I moved my mouth.

I moved my mouth as if repelling them. But I thought with annoyance of something vague, something like "don't move your mouth . . . not here . . ." Really, why should I move my mouth next to this corpse, moving it next to the corpse is not an ordinary moving. Scared, I thought I would leave.

When I thought of leaving, something I'd been afraid of for the past minute happened: I thought of looking the corpse in the mouth. Maybe it was not this particular thought that frightened



me, though I guessed that it could be something of this sort . . . it was that my wish to tear myself away from the corpse was bound to evoke a wish to accost the corpse.

It frightened me, but then it assailed me even more strongly . . . of course . . .

However, it would not be so easy—to move away the branches, to turn his face toward the moon, to look. It was even questionable whether I could look unless I climbed the tree. Complicated. And it would be better not to touch anything.

I touched, I turned his head, I looked.

His lips seemed blackened, his upper lip was greatly pulled up, his teeth were visible: a hole, a cavern. Of course I have been already, and for quite a while, peering into the thought, into the hypothesis that perhaps I'll have to hang . . . either myself, or her. Hanging was peering into me from many sides, and there were other combinations connected with it . . . often clumsy . . . After all, I had already hanged a cat. But a cat is just a cat. While here, and for the first time, I was looking human death in the mouth. Into a human mouth-cavern—hanged. Hm.

To leave. Leave it.

To leave. Leave it here, just as it is. It's none of my business, what have I got to do with this: I'm not in the least obliged to know how it happened, one takes a little sand into one's hand and one is already helplessly buried under a heap that is unlimited, immeasurable, innumerable, impossible to encompass . . . who am I to discover all the connections, perhaps he hanged himself because, e.g., Lena sometimes sleeps with Leon . . . What can one know, one can't know anything, nothing is known . . . I'll leave and leave it. Yet I didn't move, and I even thought something like "what a pity that I looked into his mouth, now I won't be able to leave."

This thought surprised me on this bright night . . . yet it was quite warranted: if I were to behave in an ordinary manner in relation to the corpse I could have left; but after what I have done with my mouth and with his mouth . . . I couldn't just leave. That is, I could have left, but I could no longer say that I was not mixed up in this . . . personally . . .

I pondered and thought very deeply, tirelessly, yet without a single thought, and I was now beginning to be scared, truly scared, I was with the corpse, the corpse and I, I and the corpse, I could not disentangle myself, really, after looking into his mouth . . .

I reached out my hand. I stuck my finger into his mouth.

It was not so easy, his jaws had already stiffened somewhat—but they moved apart—I stuck in my finger, I came upon a tongue, unfamiliar and strange, and a palate that was cool and seemed low like the ceiling of a room that is too low, I pulled out my finger . . .

I wiped my finger on my handkerchief.

I looked around. Has anyone seen me? No. I returned the hanged man to his former position, covered him with branches as best I could, I wiped away my footprints in the grass, fast, faster, fear, nerves, run away, I worked my way through the copse and, seeing that there was nothing but the stubborn trembling of the moon, I began to walk away, faster, faster, faster! But I did not run. I walked toward the house. I slowed down. What will I tell them? How will I tell them? Now this became the difficult part. I had not hanged him. I did not hang him, but after my finger in his mouth the hanged man was also mine . . .

And besides, there was the deep satisfaction that finally “mouths” had become connected with “hanging.” I had connected them! At last. As if I had performed my duty.

And now one will have to hang Lena.

Surprise now followed me at every step, I was truly surprised, because the idea of hanging was for me, thus far, theoretical, optional and, even after my finger in the mouth, the idea of hanging still did not actually change its character, it remained an eccentricity . . . or even a platitude . . . And yet the power with which the huge hanging man had driven into me, and with which I had driven into the hanging man, shattered everything. The sparrow was hanging. The stick was hanging. The cat was hanging (before they buried it). Ludwik was hanging. To hang. I was the hanging. I even stopped walking in order to give some thought to the fact that everyone, after all, wants to be himself, so I too want to be myself, for example who would love syphilis, of course no one loves syphilis, but after all, a syphilitic man also wants to be himself, namely a syphilitic, it is easy to say "I want to be well again," and yet it sounds strange, as if to say "I don't want to be who I am."

Sparrow.

Stick.

Cat.

Ludwik.

And now one will have to hang Lena.

Lena's mouth.

(The priest's and Venomie's mouths, vomiting.)

Ludwik's mouth.

And now one will have to hang Lena.

A strange matter. On the one hand everything has been trivial, evanescent, even unreal, here, far away, beyond hills and dales, by the light of the moon. On the other hand the strain of the hanging and the strain of the mouths was . . . Too bad. One must.

I walked with my hands in my pockets.

I was on a knoll descending toward the house. Voices, singing . . . I saw the flickering of flashlights on the opposite hill about a mile away—there they were. They walked under Leon’s command, pumping up their spirits with songs and jokes. There was Lena.

From here, from the hill, the landscape lay before me and trembled, as if chloroformed. Suddenly locating Lena right there was just like walking onto a field with a shotgun and spotting a hare in the distance. So I laughed. I began to walk toward them across the field. The sparrow is hanging, while I am walking. The stick is hanging, while I am walking. I hanged the cat, and I am walking. Ludwik is hanging, and I am walking.

I joined them as they began their descent on a barely visible path into a thicket. There were many bushes here and sharp gravel. They proceeded carefully, Leon at the head with a flashlight. They hollered and bantered, “Lead us on, chief!” “Down, instead of up?” “The views are down below?” “I’m sitting down! I’m not going any farther.”

“Be ye calm and patient, ta dum, ta dah, how about it, itty-bitty farther, hey-ho! Soon, soo . . . oon, this way, follow me, my troops, if you please, leave it to me! Salutations!”

I walked behind them, they didn’t notice me. She walked a little to one side, it would not have been difficult to approach her. I could approach her, of course, in the role of a strangler, a hangman. It would not have been difficult to pull her aside (because we were already in love, she was in love with me too, who could have any doubts, since I wanted to kill her she must have been in love with me), and then one could both kill and hang her. I began to understand what it is to be a murderer. One murders when murdering becomes easy, when one has nothing better to do. When other possibilities are simply being exhausted. The sparrow is

hanging, the stick is hanging, Ludwik is hanging, I'm hanging her just as I hanged the cat. I could, of course, not hang her, but . . . why cause such a disappointment? Why upset the apple cart? After so much trouble, so many combinations, hanging emerged in full, and I connected it to mouths—would I flinch now, would I forgo the hanging?

Out of the question. I walked behind them. They amused themselves with the flashlights. We sometimes see this in the movies, in a comedy, a hunter moving slowly with his weapon ready to fire, and on his heels treads a terrible beast, a huge bear, a gigantic gorilla. It was the priest. He walked right behind me, a little to one side, he seemed to trail at the very end, not knowing why or what for, perhaps he was afraid to stay by himself in the house—at first I didn't notice him, he came straggling up to me—with those peasant fingers of his, fumbling. With his cassock. Heaven and hell. Sin. The Holy Catholic Church, Our Mother. The chill of the confessional. Sin. In *saecula saeculorum*. Church. The chill of the confessional. Church and Pope. Sin. Damnation. Cassock. Heaven and hell. *Ite missa est*. Sin. Virtue. Sin. The chill of the confessional. *Sequentia sancti* . . . Church. Hell. Cassock. Sin . . . The chill of the confessional.

I pushed him hard and he reeled.

The moment I pushed him I became scared—what am I doing?! A quirk, a prank! He'll raise Cain!

But no. My hand encountered such a miserable passivity that I calmed down right away. He stopped but did not look at me. We stood. I saw his face clearly. And his mouth. I raised my hand, I wanted to stick my finger into his mouth. But his teeth were clenched. I raised his chin with my left hand, opened his mouth, stuck my finger in.

I pulled out my finger and was wiping it on my handkerchief.

Now I had to walk faster to catch up with the procession. Sticking my finger into the priest's mouth did me good, although it's one thing (I thought) to stick a finger into a corpse and another to do it to someone living, it was like introducing my phantoms into the real world. I felt invigorated. I realized that with all this happening I had forgotten for the moment about the sparrow, etc., but now I was again thinking that about fifteen miles back, the sparrow was there—and the stick was there—and the cat. And also Katasia.

"Honorable strollers, ladies and gentlemen if you please, here we'll restum on this spotum! At ease! Easy breathie for a moment."

He stood under a huge boulder that protruded over a ravine, densely overgrown. In front of the boulder was a small clearing, this place must have been frequented, I thought that I noticed wheel tracks . . . Some dry twigs, grass. "Lukie, I don't want to be here, what a place he's found!" "Colonel, sir, there is nothing to sit on," "Mr. President, sir, on the bare ground?"

"Alright, alright," Leon's voice was plaintive, "it's just that Daddy lost his cufflink. The cufflink, damnit . . . The cufflink. Would someone with a flashlight please come here."

Sparrow.

Stick.

Cat.

Ludwik.

Priest.

Leon, bent over, was looking for the cufflink, Lukie was shining his flashlight, I remembered Katasia's little room, Fuks and I shining our flashlights. Oh, so long ago. The little room was back there. With Katasia. He kept looking for the cufflink, finally he

took the flashlight from Lukie, but after a while I noticed that the light, instead of keeping to the ground, was surreptitiously sweeping over the boulder and other rocks, just like Fuks and I swept the walls of the little room with our light. Was he looking for a cufflink? Maybe not a cufflink at all, was this perhaps the place to which he's been leading us, the place of twenty-three years ago?\* . . . But he was not sure. He could not quite recognize it. Since that time new trees had grown, the ground had subsided, the boulder could have shifted, he was more and more feverishly searching with that flashlight of his, just like we had, at the time, and, seeing him thus, unsure, lost, almost drowning and water rising to his mouth, I had to think back on how we, Fuks and I, had been lost on ceilings, walls, flower beds. Those were old times! Everyone waited. No one said anything, out of curiosity probably, to finally find out what's squeaking in the grass. I saw Lena. She was delicate, lacy with her mouth stick sparrow cat, Kataria, Ludwik, and priest.

He couldn't figure it out. He was lost. He was now examining the lowest part of the boulder. All was quiet. He straightened up.

"It's here."

Lulu chirped, "What is it that's here, Mr. Leon, what is it?"

Obligingly.

He stood modestly, calmly. "What a coincidence . . . Chance, if you please, one of a kind! I'm looking for my cufflink, and I see that this rock . . . I've been here before . . . Indeed, it was here that I, twenty-three years ago . . . Here!"

Suddenly, as if on order, he was lost in thought, and this dragged

\*This is not an error. Many people have questioned it and suggest that any mention of years—i.e., thirty-seven, twenty-seven, twenty-three—may relate to milestones in Gombrowicz's own life.

on. The flashlight went out. It dragged on and dragged on. No one interrupted him, not until a few minutes later when Lulu said softly, tenderly, "What happened to you, Mr. Leon?" He replied, "Nothing."

I noticed that Roly-Poly wasn't here. Had she stayed behind at the house? What if she had hanged Ludwik? Nonsense. He hanged himself. Why? As yet, no one knows about it. What will happen when they find out?

Sparrow.

Stick.

Cat.

Ludwik.

It was difficult, arduous to realize that what is happening here, now, is in relation to that there, then, fifteen miles back. And I was mad that Leon was playing first fiddle, while everyone else (not excluding myself) became his . . . spectators . . . we were here to see . . .

He muttered indistinctly.

"Here. With a woman . . ."

Again a few silent minutes, quiet, the long minutes dripped with swinishness and became a confession, and since no one spoke it meant that we are here for the sole reason of his doing his business in our presence . . . with his own . . . self-gratifying . . . gratify yourself . . . We waited for him to be done. Time went by.

He unexpectedly shone the flashlight on his face. His spectacles, his bald head, mouth, everything. Eyes closed. A voluptuary. A martyr. He said:

"There are no other views."

He switched off the flashlight. The darkness caught me by surprise, it was darker than one would have expected, probably be-



cause clouds were already overhead. He was almost invisible by the boulder. What was he doing? He must have been doing his own disgusting stuff, exciting himself, recollecting his long-gone, one and only wench, he tried hard, worked at it, celebrated his swinishness. But . . . but what if he wasn't sure that it was here? And he was celebrating at random? I was surprised that no one is leaving, surely they have realized by now why he had brought them here, to assist him, to watch, to excite him with their watching. It would be so easy to walk away. But no one walked away. Lena, for instance, could have walked away, but she didn't walk away. She did not move. He began to breathe hard. He panted rhythmically. No one could see what he was up to, or how. But they did not walk away. He groaned. His groan was sensuous, but, actually, laborious, it was to voluptualize himself. He groaned and yelped. His yelp, muffled and throaty, was to help him whore himself, oh how he labored and how he strained, oh how he pigged himself, and oh how he celebrated and solemnized . . . He labored. He strained. He breathed hard. He yelped. He's straining. He's laboring. We waited. Then he said:

"Berg."

I replied.

"Berg."

"Bemberging with bemberg into berg!" he exclaimed, and I exclaimed: "Bemberging with bemberg into berg!"

He calmed down completely and we could hear nothing, I was thinking sparrow Lena stick Lena cat into the mouth honey lip twirl-up wall clod of dirt scratch finger Ludwik bushes hangs hang mouth Lena alone there kettle cat stick fence road Ludwik priest wall cat stick sparrow cat Ludwik hangs stick hangs sparrow hangs Ludwik cat I'll hang———Suddenly it started pouring.

Loose, dense drops, we lift our heads, it suddenly poured buckets, water came down in sheets, a sudden wind rose, panic, everyone running for the nearest tree, but the pines are leaking, dripping, dribbling, water, water, water, wet hair, backs, thighs, and just ahead of us in the dark darkness a vertical wall of falling water interrupted solely by despairing flashlights, then, in the light of the flashlights, one could see it pour, fall, also streams, waterfalls, lakes, it drips, spurts, splashes, lakes, seas, currents of gurgling water and a bit of straw, stick, leaf carried by water, disappearing, confluence of streams, rivers arising, islands, obstacles, barriers and curlicues, while above from above high up a deluge, it's pouring, it's falling, while below a leaf rushing by, a disappearing piece of tree bark, all resulting in shivers, head cold, fever, Lena developed a sore throat, a taxi had to be ordered from Zakopane, sickness, doctors, something else entirely, I returned to Warsaw, my parents, war with my father again, various other things, problems, complications, difficulties. Today we had chicken fricassee for dinner.