

THE
UNREAL
AND THE
REAL

ALSO BY
URSULA K. LE GUIN

NOVELS

The Books of Earthsea
A Wizard of Earthsea
The Tombs of Atuan
The Farthest Shore
Tehanu
Tales from Earthsea
The Other Wind

NOVELS OF THE EKUMEN

Worlds of Exile and Illusion:
City of Illusions, Planet of Exile,
and Rocannon's World
The Left Hand of Darkness
The Dispossessed:
An Ambiguous Utopia
The Word for World Is Forest
The Telling

THE ANNALS OF THE
WESTERN SHORE

Powers
Voices
Gifts

OTHER NOVELS

The Lathe of Heaven
Very Far Away from
Anywhere Else
Malafrena
The Beginning Place
The Eye of Heron
Always Coming Home
Lavinia
The Complete Orsinia:
Malafrena/Stories and Songs

POETRY

Wild Angels
Hard Words and Other Poems
Wild Oats and Fireweed
Blue Moon over Thurman Street
Going Out with Peacocks and
Other Poems
Sixty Odd
Incredible Good Fortune
Finding My Elegy
Late in the Day

STORY COLLECTIONS

The Wind's Twelve Quarters

Orsinian Tales

The Compass Rose

Buffalo Gals

Searoad

A Fisherman of the Inland Sea

Four Ways to Forgiveness

Unlocking the Air

The Birthday of the World

Changing Planes

The Unreal and the Real:

Selected Stories, Volume One:

Where on Earth

The Unreal and the Real:

Selected Stories, Volume Two:

Outer Space, Inner Lands

The Found and the Lost

TRANSLATIONS

Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching

The Twins, the Dreams/Las

Gemelas, El Sueño

(with Diana Bellessi)

Kalpa Imperial

Selected Poems of Gabriela Mistral

CRITICISM

Dancing at the Edge of the World

The Language of the Night

The Wave in the Mind

Cheek by Jowl

Steering the Craft

Words Are My Matter

T H E
U N R E A L
A N D T H E
R E A L

———— THE ————
S E L E C T E D S H O R T S T O R I E S
———— OF ————
U R S U L A K .
L E G U I N

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PART I:

WHERE ON EARTH

INTRODUCTION

Choosing and Dividing

I BEGGED PEOPLE—EDITORS, FRIENDS, THIRD COUSINS ONCE removed—to help me select stories for this collection, but nobody would. So all the credit for good choices and all the blame for bad ones is mine. If something you rightfully expected to find here isn't here, I'm sorry. I had to leave out a lot of stories, because I've written a lot of them.

The first way I found to reduce the mob to a manageable size was: limit it to short stories. No novellas—even though the novella is my favorite story-form, a lovely length, in which you can do just about what a novel does without using all those words. But each novella would crowd out three, four, five short stories. So they all had to be shut out, tearfully.

There were still way too many stories, so I had to make arbitrary restrictions. I mostly avoided stories closely tied to novels, set on Gethen or on Anarres, etc.—and stories forming an integral part of story-suites, where the pieces are linked by characters, setting, and chronology, forming an almost-novelistic whole. But “May's Lion” is closely tied to *Always Coming Home*, and three of the stories from *Orsinian Tales* form a loose, many-decade sort of suite. . . . Oh well. Consistency is a virtue until it gets annoying.

So there I was with enough stories, still, to make a book about the

size of the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*. I therefore developed extremely scientific and methodical criteria for my choices.

The first criterion was: Do I like the story?

The answer was almost invariably Yes, so it wasn't much of a criterion. I refined it to: Do I really like the story a lot? That worked better. It resulted in a very large pile of stories I liked a lot.

I then exercised the next criterion: How well would this story work with all the others? which was very difficult to put into operation, but did eliminate some. And by then a further principle of selection had appeared as a question: Should I put a story in this collection because I think it has been overshadowed, has received less attention than it maybe deserved?

That's a tricky call. Luck, fashion, literary awards, and other uncontrollable factors play a part in when and whether a story gets noticed. The only near certainty is that the more often it's reprinted, the more often it will be reprinted. Familiarity sells. "Nine Lives" was republished more often than any of my other stories for years, until "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (after a slowish start despite winning the Hugo Award) took a handy lead and is still galloping happily along like Seabiscuit.

I did decide to include some stories partly because I wanted to bring them back into the light. Most of them, but not all, are in this first volume.

And here we arrive at the next choice I had to make, once I had chosen all the stories I wanted in the collection. They were to go in two volumes. How should I divide them?

At first I thought I should simply put them in chronological order as written. I tried it, and didn't like the effect. I ended up sorting them into the two parts I call "Where on Earth" and "Outer Space, Inner Lands."

I think the two titles are sufficiently descriptive and need no further explanation. Some people will identify the first volume as "mundane" and the second as "science fiction," but they will be wrong. All the science-fiction stories are in the second volume, but not all the stories in the

second volume are science fiction by any definition. I'll talk more about all that in the introduction to the second volume. Let's now find out where on earth we're going.

THE STORIES IN THIS VOLUME

WHEN I WAS A SOPHOMORE IN COLLEGE, I CAME UPON OR DISCOVERED or invented a country in central Europe called Orsinia. Orsinia gave me an entry to fiction. It gave me the ground, the room I needed. I had been writing realistic stories (bourgeois-U.S.A.-1948) because realism was what a serious writer was supposed to write under the rule of modernism, which had decreed that non-realistic fiction, if not mere kiddilit, was trash.

I was a very serious young writer. I never had anything against realistic novels, and loved many of them. I am not theory-minded, and did not yet try to question or argue with this arbitrary impoverishment of literature. But I was soon aware that the ground it offered my particular talent was small and stony. I had to find my own way elsewhere.

Orsinia was the way, lying between actuality, which was supposed to be the sole subject of fiction, and the limitless realms of the imagination. I found the country, drew the map, wrote stories about it, wrote two novels about it, one of which was published later as *Malafrena*, and revisited it happily now and then for many years. The first four stories in this volume are Orsinian tales, and the first of them, "Brothers and Sisters," was the first story I wrote that I knew was good, was right, was as close as I could come. I was in my mid-twenties by then.

Since the story "Unlocking the Air," written in 1990, I have had no word from Orsinia. I miss hearing from my people there.

I don't think "The Diary of the Rose" takes place in Orsinia, it seems more like South America to me, but the protagonist has an Orsinian name.

By the early Sixties, when I finally began getting stories published, I was quite certain that reality is often best represented slantwise, backwards, or as if it were an imaginary country, and also that I could write about anywhere and anything I liked, with a hope though no expectation that somebody, somewhere, would publish it.

I could even write realism, if I wanted to.

The stories “Texts,” “Sleepwalkers,” and “Hand, Cup, Shell,” all from the collection *Searoad*, take place in present-day Oregon, in a semi-disguised beach-town I call Klatsand. The protagonist of “The Direction of the Road” still lives beside Highway 18, near McMinnville, in Oregon. “Buffalo Gals” is set in the high desert of Eastern Oregon. “Ether, OR” moves between the dry East side and the green West side of the state in a peaceful, improbable, taken-for-granted way that I think is something I learned from living in Oregon for fifty years.

“The White Donkey” seems to be in a dreamed India, and “Gwilan’s Harp” somewhere along the borders of a fantasy-Wales. Spatial location of stories like “The Water is Wide” or “The Lost Children” is irrelevant, other than that they are in America—reflections of a moment in American time. “May’s Lion” is set in the Napa Valley of California, where I spent the timeless summers of my childhood, and “Half Past Four” is mostly in Berkeley, where I grew up.

“Half Past Four” is pure realism, but in a somewhat unusual form. In a one-day writing workshop in San Jose, the poetry teacher and I traded classes after lunch: he got my fiction-writers and made them write poems, and I got his poets, to whom I was supposed to teach story-writing. They put up a huge fuss—poets always do. No, no, I am a Poet and cannot possibly tell stories! I said yes you can. I’ll give you the names of four people and tell you their relative status; and you’ll put them together in a specific place, and look at them for a while, and see that their relationship gives you the beginning of a story. (I made this all up on the spot.) The four character names I gave them were:

Stephen, an older man in a position of relative power or authority; Ann, young, without authority; Ella, older, without much authority; and Todd, young or very young, without any authority.

One brave poet went home and did the assignment; she sent me her story, and it was good. I went home and did the assignment eight times, using those same four names (plus a few extras, such as Marie and Bill). I sent it to *The New Yorker*. They were game and published the piece. The feedback I got showed that many readers tried hard to make the eight Stephens into one Stephen, the eight Ellas into one Ella. It can't be done. The eight brief stories in "Half Past Four" are about thirty-two different people, thirty-two different characters, plus Marie and Bill sometimes. All eight stories have to do with power, identity, and relationship; certain themes and images recur in them and interweave; and they all take place at about four-thirty in the afternoon. I'm still pleased with my assignment.

—*Ursula K. Le Guin. August 2012.*

BROTHERS AND SISTERS

THE INJURED QUARRIER LAY ON A HIGH HOSPITAL BED. HE HAD not recovered consciousness. His silence was grand and oppressive; his body under the sheet that dropped in stiff folds, his face were as indifferent as stone. The mother, as if challenged by that silence and indifference, spoke loudly: "What did you do it for? Do you want to die before I do? Look at him, look at him, my beauty, my hawk, my river, my son!" Her sorrow boasted of itself. She rose to the occasion like a lark to the morning. His silence and her outcry meant the same thing: the unendurable made welcome. The younger son stood listening. They bore him down with their grief as large as life. Unconscious, heedless, broken like a piece of chalk, that body, his brother, bore him down with the weight of the flesh, and he wanted to run away, to save himself.

The man who had been saved stood beside him, a little stooped fellow, middle-aged, limestone dust white in his knuckles. He too was borne down. "He saved my life," he said to Stefan, gaping, wanting an explanation. His voice was the flat toneless voice of the deaf.

"He would," Stefan said. "That's what he'd do."

He left the hospital to get his lunch. Everybody asked him about his brother. "He'll live," Stefan said. He went to the White Lion for

lunch, drank too much. “Crippled? Him? Kostant? So he got a couple of tons of rock in the face, it won’t hurt him, he’s made of the stuff. He wasn’t born, he was quarried out.” They laughed at him as usual. “Quarried out,” he said. “Like all the rest of you.” He left the White Lion, went down Ardure Street four blocks straight out of town, and kept on straight, walking northeast, parallel with the railroad tracks a quarter mile away. The May sun was small and greyish overhead. Underfoot there were dust and small weeds. The karst, the limestone plain, jiggled tinily about him with heatwaves like the transparent vibrating wings of flies. Remote and small, rigid beyond that vibrant greyish haze, the mountains stood. He had known the mountains from far off all his life, and twice had seen them close, when he took the Brailava train, once going, once coming back. He knew they were clothed in trees, fir trees with roots clutching the banks of running streams and with branches dark in the mist that closed and parted in the mountain gullies in the light of dawn as the train clanked by, its smoke dropping down the green slopes like a dropping veil. In the mountains the streams ran noisy in the sunlight; there were waterfalls. Here on the karst the rivers ran underground, silent in dark veins of stone. You could ride a horse all day from Sfaroy Kampe and still not reach the mountains, still be in the limestone dust; but late on the second day you would come under the shade of trees, by running streams. Stefan Fabbre sat down by the side of the straight unreal road he had been walking on, and put his head in his arms. Alone, a mile from town, a quarter mile from the tracks, sixty miles from the mountains, he sat and cried for his brother. The plain of dust and stone quivered and grimaced about him in the heat like the face of a man in pain.

He got back an hour late from lunch to the office of the Chorin Company where he worked as an accountant. His boss came to his desk: “Fabbre, you needn’t stay this afternoon.”

“Why not?”

“Well, if you want to go to the hospital . . .”

“What can I do there? I can’t sew him back up, can I?”

“As you like,” the boss said, turning away.

“Not me that got a ton of rocks in the face, is it?” Nobody answered him.

When Kostant Fabbre was hurt in the rockslide in the quarry he was twenty-six years old; his brother was twenty-three; their sister Rosana was thirteen. She was beginning to grow tall and sullen, to weigh upon the earth. Instead of running, now, she walked, ungainly and somewhat hunched, as if at each step she crossed, unwilling, a threshold. She talked loudly, and laughed aloud. She struck back at whatever touched her, a voice, a wind, a word she did not understand, the evening star. She had not learned indifference, she knew only defiance. Usually she and Stefan quarrelled, touching each other where each was raw, unfinished. This night when he got home the mother had not come back from the hospital, and Rosana was silent in the silent house. She had been thinking all afternoon about pain, about pain and death; defiance had failed her.

“Don’t look so down,” Stefan told her as she served out beans for supper. “He’ll be all right.”

“Do you think . . . Somebody was saying he might be, you know. . . .”

“Crippled? No, he’ll be all right.”

“Why do you think he, you know, ran to push that fellow out of the way?”

“No why to it, Ros. He just did it.”

He was touched that she asked these questions of him, and surprised at the certainty of his answers. He had not thought that he had any answers.

“It’s queer,” she said.

“What is?”

“I don’t know. Kostant . . .”

“Knocked the keystone out of your arch, didn’t it? Wham! One rock falls, they all go.” She did not understand him; she did not recognise the place where she had come today, a place where she was like other people, sharing with them the singular catastrophe of being alive. Stefan was

not the one to guide her. "Here we all are," he went on, "lying around each of us under our private pile of rocks. At least they got Kostant out from under his and filled him up with morphine. . . . D'you remember once when you were little you said 'I'm going to marry Kostant when I grow up.'"

Rosana nodded. "Sure. And he got real mad."

"Because mother laughed."

"It was you and dad that laughed."

Neither of them was eating. The room was close and dark around the kerosene lamp.

"What was it like when dad died?"

"You were there," Stefan said.

"I was nine. But I can't remember it. Except it was hot like now, and there were a lot of big moths knocking their heads on the glass. Was that the night he died?"

"I guess so."

"What was it like?" She was trying to explore the new land.

"I don't know. He just died. It isn't like anything else."

The father had died of pneumonia at forty-six, after thirty years in the quarries. Stefan did not remember his death much more clearly than Rosana did. He had not been the keystone of the arch.

"Have we got any fruit to eat?"

The girl did not answer. She was gazing at the air above the place at the table where the elder brother usually sat. Her forehead and dark eyebrows were like his, were his: likeness between kin is identity, the brother and sister were, by so much or so little, the curve of brow and temple, the same person; so that, for a moment, Kostant sat across the table mutely contemplating his own absence.

"Is there any?"

"I think there's some apples in the pantry," she answered, coming back to herself, but so quietly that in her brother's eyes she seemed briefly a

woman, a quiet woman speaking out of her thoughts; and he said with tenderness to that woman, "Come on, let's go over to the hospital. They must be through messing with him by now."

The deaf man had come back to the hospital. His daughter was with him. Stefan knew she clerked at the butcher's shop. The deaf man, not allowed into the ward, kept Stefan half an hour in the hot, pine-floored waiting room that smelled of disinfectant and resin. He talked, walking about, sitting down, jumping up, arguing in the loud even monotone of his deafness. "I'm not going back to the pit. No sir. What if I'd said last night I'm not going into the pit tomorrow? Then how'd it be now, see? I wouldn't be here now, nor you wouldn't, nor he wouldn't, him in there, your brother. We'd all be home. Home safe and sound, see? I'm not going back to the pit. No, by God. I'm going out to the farm, that's where I'm going. I grew up there, see, out west in the foothills there, my brother's there. I'm going back and work the farm with him. I'm not going back to the pit again."

The daughter sat on the wooden bench, erect and still. Her face was narrow, her black hair was pulled back in a knot. "Aren't you hot?" Stefan asked her, and she answered gravely, "No, I'm all right." Her voice was clear. She was used to speaking to her deaf father. When Stefan said nothing more she looked down again and sat with her hands in her lap. The father was still talking. Stefan rubbed his hands through his sweaty hair and tried to interrupt. "Good, sounds like a good plan, Sachik. Why waste the rest of your life in the pits." The deaf man talked right on.

"He doesn't hear you."

"Can't you take him home?"

"I couldn't make him leave here even for dinner. He won't stop talking."

Her voice was much lower saying this, perhaps from embarrassment, and the sound of it caught at Stefan. He rubbed his sweaty hair again and stared at her, thinking for some reason of smoke, waterfalls, the mountains.

“You go on home.” He heard in his own voice the qualities of hers, softness and clarity. “I’ll get him over to the Lion for an hour.”

“Then you won’t see your brother.”

“He won’t run away. Go on home.”

At the White Lion both men drank heavily. Sachik talked on about the farm in the foothills, Stefan talked about the mountains and his year at college in the city. Neither heard the other. Drunk, Stefan walked Sachik home to one of the rows of party-walled houses that the Chorin Company had put up in ’95 when they opened the new quarry. The houses were on the west edge of town, and behind them the karst stretched in the light of the half-moon away on and on, pocked, pitted, level, answering the moonlight with its own pallor taken at third-hand from the sun. The moon, second-hand, worn at the edges, was hung up in the sky like something a housewife leaves out to remind her it needs mending. “Tell your daughter everything is all right,” Stefan said, swaying at the door. “Everything is all right,” Sachik repeated with enthusiasm, “aa-all right.”

Stefan went home drunk, and so the day of the accident blurred in his memory into the rest of the days of the year, and the fragments that stayed with him, his brother’s closed eyes, the dark girl looking at him, the moon looking at nothing, did not recur to his mind together as parts of a whole, but separately with long intervals between.

ON THE KARST THERE ARE NO SPRINGS; THE WATER THEY DRINK in Sfaroy Kampe comes from deep wells and is pure, without taste. Ekata Sachik tasted the strange spring-water of the farm still on her lips as she scrubbed an iron skillet at the sink. She scrubbed with a stiff brush, using more energy than was needed, absorbed in the work deep below the level of conscious pleasure. Food had been burned in the skillet, the water she poured in fled brown from the bristles of the brush, glittering in the lamplight. They none of them knew how to cook here at the

farm. Sooner or later she would take over the cooking and they could eat properly. She liked housework, she liked to clean, to bend hot-faced to the oven of a woodburning range, to call people in to supper; lively, complex work, not a bore like clerking at the butcher's shop, making change, saying "Good day" and "Good day" all day. She had left town with her family because she was sick of that. The farm family had taken the four of them in without comment, as a natural disaster, more mouths to feed, but also more hands to work. It was a big, poor farm. Ekata's mother, who was ailing, crept about behind the bustling aunt and cousin; the men, Ekata's uncle, father, and brother, tromped in and out in dusty boots; there were long discussions about buying another pig. "It's better here than in the town, there's nothing in the town," Ekata's widowed cousin said; Ekata did not answer her. She had no answer. "I think Martin will be going back," she said finally, "he never thought to be a farmer." And in fact her brother, who was sixteen, went back to Sfaroy Kampe in August to work in the quarries.

He took a room in a boarding house. His window looked down on the Fabbres' back yard, a fenced square of dust and weeds with a sad-looking fir tree at one corner. The landlady, a quarrier's widow, was dark, straight-backed, calm, like Martin's sister Ekata. With her the boy felt manly and easy. When she was out, her daughter and the other boarders, four single men in their twenties, took over; they laughed and slapped one another on the back; the railway clerk from Brailava would take out his guitar and play music-hall songs, rolling his eyes like raisins set in lard. The daughter, thirty and unmarried, would laugh and move about a great deal, her shirtwaist would come out of her belt in back and she would not tuck it in. Why did they make so much fuss? Why did they laugh, punch one another's shoulders, play the guitar and sing? They would begin to make fun of Martin. He would shrug and reply gruffly. Once he replied in the language used in the quarry pits. The guitar player took him aside and spoke to him seriously about how one

must behave in front of ladies. Martin listened with his red face bowed. He was a big, broad-shouldered boy. He thought he might pick up this clerk from Brailava and break his neck. He did not do it. He had no right to. The clerk and the others were men; there was something they understood which he did not understand, the reason why they made a fuss, rolled their eyes, played and sang. Until he understood that, they were justified in telling him how to speak to ladies. He went up to his room and leaned out the window to smoke a cigarette. The smoke hung in the motionless evening air which enclosed the fir tree, the roofs, the world in a large dome of hard, dark-blue crystal. Rosana Fabbre came out into the fenced yard next door, dumped out a pan of dishwater with a short, fine swing of her arms, then stood still to look up at the sky, foreshortened, a dark head over a white blouse, caught in the blue crystal. Nothing moved for sixty miles in all directions except the last drops of water in the dishpan, which one by one fell to the ground, and the smoke of Martin's cigarette curling and dropping away from his fingers. Slowly he drew in his hand so that her eye would not be caught by the tiny curl of smoke. She sighed, whacked the dishpan on the jamb of the door to shake out the last drops, which had already run out, turned, went in; the door slammed. The blue air rejoined without a flaw where she had stood. Martin murmured to that flawless air the word he had been advised not to say in front of ladies, and in a moment, as if in answer, the evening star shone out northwestwards high and clear.

Kostant Fabbre was home, and alone all day now that he was able to get across a room on crutches. How he spent these vast silent days no one considered, probably least of all himself. An active man, the strongest and most intelligent worker in the quarries, a crew foreman since he was twenty-three, he had had no practice at all at idleness, or solitude. He had always used his time to the full in work. Now time must use him. He watched it at work upon him without dismay or impatience, carefully,

like an apprentice watching a master. He employed all his strength to learn his new trade, that of weakness. The silence in which he passed the days clung to him now as the limestone dust had used to cling to his skin.

The mother worked in the dry-goods shop till six; Stefan got off work at five. There was an hour in the evening when the brothers were together alone. Stefan had used to spend this hour out in the back yard under the fir tree, stupid, sighing, watching swallows dart after invisible insects in the interminably darkening air, or else he had gone to the White Lion. Now he came home promptly, bringing Kostant the *Brailava Messenger*. They both read it, exchanging sheets. Stefan planned to speak, but did not. The dust lay on his lips. Nothing happened. Over and over the same hour passed. The older brother sat still, his handsome, quiet face bowed over the newspaper. He read slowly; Stefan had to wait to exchange sheets; he could see Kostant's eyes move from word to word. Then Rosana would come in yelling good-bye to schoolmates in the street, the mother would come in, doors would bang, voices ring from room to room, the kitchen would smoke and clatter, plates clash, the hour was gone.

One evening Kostant, having barely begun to read, laid the newspaper down. There was a long pause which contained no events and which Stefan, reading, pretended not to notice.

"Stefan, my pipe's there by you."

"Oh, sure," Stefan mumbled, took him his pipe. Kostant filled and lit it, drew on it a few times, set it down. His right hand lay on the arm of the chair, hard and relaxed, holding in it a knot of desolation too heavy to lift. Stefan hid behind his paper and the silence went on.

I'll read out this about the union coalition to him, Stefan thought, but he did not. His eyes insisted on finding another article, reading it. Why can't I talk to him?

"Ros is growing up," Kostant said.

“She’s getting on,” Stefan mumbled.

“She’ll take some looking after. I’ve been thinking. This is no town for a girl growing up. Wild lads and hard men.”

“You’ll find them anywhere.”

“Will you; no doubt,” Kostant said, accepting Stefan’s statement without question. Kostant had never been off the karst, never been out of Sfaroy Kampe. He knew nothing at all but limestone, Ardure Street and Chorin Street and Gulhelm Street, the mountains far off and the enormous sky.

“See,” he said, picking up his pipe again, “she’s a bit wilful, I think.”

“Lads will think twice before they mess with Fabbre’s sister,” Stefan said. “Anyhow, she’ll listen to you.”

“And you.”

“Me? What should she listen to me for?”

“For the same reasons,” Kostant said, but Stefan had found his voice now—“What should she respect me for? She’s got good enough sense. You and I didn’t listen to anything dad said, did we? Same thing.”

“You’re not like him. If that’s what you meant. You’ve had an education.”

“An education, I’m a real professor, sure. Christ! One year at the Normal School!”

“Why did you fail there, Stefan?”

The question was not asked lightly; it came from the heart of Kostant’s silence, from his austere, pondering ignorance. Unnerved at finding himself, like Rosana, included so deeply in the thoughts of this reserved and superb brother, Stefan said the first thing that came to mind—“I was afraid I’d fail. So I didn’t work.”

And there it was, plain as a glass of water, the truth, which he had never admitted to himself.

Kostant nodded, thinking over this idea of failure, which was surely not one familiar to him; then he said in his resonant, gentle voice, “You’re wasting your time here in Kampe.”

“I am? What about yourself?”

"I'm wasting nothing. I never won any scholarship." Kostant smiled, and the humor of his smile angered Stefan.

"No, you never tried, you went straight to the pit at fifteen. Listen, did you ever wonder, did you ever stop a minute to ask what am I doing here, why did I go into the quarries, what do I work there for, am I going to work there six days a week every week of the year every year of my life? For pay, sure, there's other ways to make a living. What's it *for*? Why does anybody stay here, in this Godforsaken town on this Godforsaken piece of rock where nothing grows? Why don't they get up and go somewhere? Talk about wasting your time! What in God's name is it all for—is this all there is to it?"

"I have thought that."

"I haven't thought anything else for years."

"Why not go, then?"

"Because I'm afraid to. It'd be like Brailava, like the college. But you—"

"I've got my work here. It's mine, I can do it. Anywhere you go, you can still ask what it's all for."

"I know." Stefan got up, a slight man moving and talking restlessly, half finishing his gestures and words. "I know. You take yourself with yourself. But that means one thing for me and something else again for you. You're wasting yourself here, Kostant. It's the same as this business, this hero business, smashing yourself up for that Sachik, a fool who can't even see a rockslide coming at him—"

"He couldn't *hear* it," Kostant put in, but Stefan could not stop now. "That's not the point; the point is, let that kind of man look after himself, what's he to you, what's his life to you? Why did you go in after him when you saw the slide coming? For the same reason as you went into the pit, for the same reason as you keep working in the pit. For no reason. Because it just came up. It just happened. You let things happen to you, you take what's handed you, when you could take it all in your hands and do what you wanted with it!"

It was not what he had meant to say, not what he had wanted to say. He had wanted Kostant to talk. But words fell out of his own mouth and bounced around him like hailstones. Kostant sat quiet, his strong hand closed not to open; finally he answered: "You're making something of me I'm not." That was not humility. There was none in him. His patience was that of pride. He understood Stefan's yearning but could not share it, for he lacked nothing; he was intact. He would go forward in the same, splendid, vulnerable integrity of body and mind towards whatever came to meet him on his road, like a king in exile on a land of stone, bearing all his kingdom—cities, trees, people, mountains, fields and flights of birds in spring—in his closed hand, a seed for the sowing; and, because there was no one of his language to speak to, silent.

"But listen, you said you've thought the same thing, what's it all for, is this all there is to life—If you've thought that, you must have looked for the answer!"

After a long pause Kostant said, "I nearly found it. Last May."

Stefan stopped fidgeting, looked out the front window in silence. He was frightened. "That—that's not an answer," he mumbled.

"Seems like there ought to be a better one," Kostant agreed.

"You get morbid sitting here. . . . What you need's a woman," Stefan said, fidgeting, slurring his words, staring out at the early-autumn evening rising from stone pavements unobscured by tree branches or smoke, even, clear, and empty. Behind him, his brother laughed. "It's the truth," Stefan said bitterly, not turning.

"Could be. How about yourself?"

"They're sitting out on the steps there at widow Katalny's. She must be night nursing at the hospital again. Hear the guitar? That's the fellow from Brailava, works at the railway office, goes after anything in skirts. Even goes after Nona Katalny. Sachik's kid lives there now. Works in the New Pit, somebody said. Maybe in your crew."

"What kid?"

“Sachik’s.”

“Thought he’d left town.”

“He did, went to some farm in the west hills. This is his kid, must have stayed behind to work.”

“Where’s the girl?”

“Went with her father as far as I know.”

The pause this time lengthened out, stretched around them like a pool in which their last words floated, desultory, vague, fading. The room was full of dusk. Kostant stretched and sighed. Stefan felt peace come into him, as intangible and real as the coming of the darkness. They had talked, and got nowhere; it was not a last step; the next step would come in its time. But for a moment he was at peace with his brother, and with himself.

“Evenings getting shorter,” Kostant said softly.

“I’ve seen her once or twice. Saturdays. Comes in with a farm wagon.”

“Where’s the farm at?”

“West, in the hills, was all old Sachik said.”

“Might ride out there, if I could,” Kostant said. He struck a match for his pipe. The flare of the match in the clear dusk of the room was also a peaceful thing; when Stefan looked back at the window the evening seemed darker. The guitar had stopped and they were laughing out on the steps next door.

“If I see her Saturday I’ll ask her to come by.”

Kostant said nothing. Stefan wanted no answer. It was the first time in his life that his brother had asked his help.

The mother came in, tall, loud-voiced, tired. Floors cracked and cried under her step, the kitchen clashed and steamed, everything was noisy in her presence except her two sons, Stefan who eluded her, Kostant who was her master.

Stefan got off work Saturdays at noon. He sauntered down Ardure Street looking out for the farm wagon and roan horse. They were not in town,

and he went to the White Lion, relieved and bored. Another Saturday came and a third. It was October, the afternoons were shorter. Martin Sachik was walking down Gulhelm Street ahead of him; he caught up and said, "Evening, Sachik." The boy looked at him with blank grey eyes; his face, hands, and clothes were grey with stone-dust and he walked as slowly and steadily as a man of fifty.

"Which crew are you in?"

"Five." He spoke distinctly, like his sister.

"That's my brother's."

"I know." They went on pace for pace. "They said he might be back in the pit next month."

Stefan shook his head.

"Your family still out there on that farm?" he asked.

Martin nodded, as they stopped in front of the Katalny house. He revived, now that he was home and very near dinner. He was flattered by Stefan Fabbre's speaking to him, but not shy of him. Stefan was clever, but he was spoken of as a moody, unsteady fellow, half a man where his brother was a man and a half. "Near Verre," Martin said. "A hell of a place. I couldn't take it."

"Can your sister?"

"Figures she has to stay with Ma. She ought to come back. It's a hell of a place."

"This isn't heaven," Stefan said.

"Work your head off there and never get any money for it, they're all loony on those farms. Right where Dad belongs." Martin felt virile, speaking disrespectfully of his father. Stefan Fabbre looked at him, not with respect, and said, "Maybe. Evening to you, Sachik." Martin went into the house defeated. When was he going to become a man, not subject to other men's reproof? Why did it matter if Stefan Fabbre looked at him and turned away? The next day he met Rosana Fabbre on the street. She was with a girl friend, he with a fellow quarrier; they had all been

in school together last year. "How you doing, Ros?" Martin said loudly, nudging his friend. The girls walked by haughty as cranes. "There's a hot one," Martin said. "Her? She's just a kid," the friend said. "You'd be surprised," Martin told him with a thick laugh, then looked up and saw Stefan Fabbre crossing the street. For a moment he realised that he was surrounded, there was no escape.

Stefan was on the way to the White Lion, but passing the town hotel and livery stable he saw the roan horse in the yard. He went in, and sat in the brown parlour of the hotel in the smell of harness grease and dried spiders. He sat there two hours. She came in, erect, a black kerchief on her hair, so long awaited and so fully herself that he watched her go by with simple pleasure, and only woke as she started up the stairs. "Miss Sachik," he said.

She stopped, startled, on the stairs.

"Wanted to ask you a favor." Stefan's voice was thick after the strange timeless waiting. "You're staying here over tonight?"

"Yes."

"Kostant was asking about you. Wanted to ask about your father. He's still stuck indoors, can't walk much."

"Father's fine."

"Well, I wondered if—"

"I could look in. I was going to see Martin. It's next door, isn't it?"

"Oh, fine. That's—I'll wait."

Ekata ran up to her room, washed her dusty face and hands, and put on, to decorate her grey dress, a lace collar that she had brought to wear to church tomorrow. Then she took it off again. She retied the black kerchief over her black hair, went down, and walked with Stefan six blocks through the pale October sunlight to his house. When she saw Kostant Fabbre she was staggered. She had never seen him close to except in the hospital where he had been effaced by casts, bandages, heat, pain, her father's chatter. She saw him now.

They fell to talking quite easily. She would have felt wholly at ease with him if it had not been for his extraordinary beauty, which distracted her. His voice and what he said was grave, plain, and reassuring. It was the other way round with the younger brother, who was nothing at all to look at, but with whom she felt ill at ease, at a loss. Kostant was quiet and quieting; Stefan blew in gusts like autumn wind, bitter and fitful; you didn't know where you were with him.

"How is it for you out there?" Kostant was asking, and she replied, "All right. A bit dreary."

"Farming's the hardest work, they say."

"I don't mind the hard, it's the muck I mind."

"Is there a village near?"

"Well, it's halfway between Verre and Lotima. But there's neighbors, everybody within twenty miles knows each other."

"We're still your neighbors, by that reckoning," Stefan put in. His voice slurred off in midsentence. He felt irrelevant to these two. Kostant sat relaxed, his lame leg stretched out, his hands clasped round the other knee; Ekata faced him, upright, her hands lying easy in her lap. They did not look alike but might have been brother and sister. Stefan got up with a mumbled excuse and went out back. The north wind blew. Sparrows hopped in the sour dirt under the fir tree and the scurf of weedy grass. Shirts, underclothes, a pair of sheets snapped, relaxed, jounced on the clothesline between two iron posts. The air smelt of ozone. Stefan vaulted the fence, cut across the Katalny yard to the street, and walked westward. After a couple of blocks the street petered out. A track led on to a quarry, abandoned twenty years ago when they struck water; there was twenty feet of water in it now. Boys swam there, summers. Stefan had swum there, in terror, for he had never learned to swim well and there was no foothold, it was all deep and bitter cold. A boy had drowned there years ago, last year a man had drowned himself, a quarrier going blind from stone-splinters in his eyes. It was still called

the West Pit. Stefan's father had worked in it as a boy. Stefan sat down by the lip of it and watched the wind, caught down in the four walls, eddy in tremors over the water that reflected nothing.

"I have to go meet Martin," Ekata said. As she stood up Kostant put a hand out to his crutches, then gave it up: "Takes me too long to get afoot," he said.

"How much can you get about on those?"

"From here to there," he said, pointing to the kitchen. "Leg's all right. It's the back's slow."

"You'll be off them—?"

"Doctor says by Easter. I'll run out and throw 'em in the West Pit. . . ." They both smiled. She felt tenderness for him, and a pride in knowing him.

"Will you be coming in to Kampe, I wonder, when bad weather comes?"

"I don't know how the roads will be."

"If you do, come by," he said. "If you like."

"I will."

They noticed then that Stefan was gone.

"I don't know where he went to," Kostant said. "He comes and he goes, Stefan does. Your brother, Martin, they tell me he's a good lad in our crew."

"He's young," Ekata said.

"It's hard at first. I went in at fifteen. But then when you've got your strength, you know the work, and it goes easy. Good wishes to your family, then." She shook his big, hard, warm hand, and let herself out. On the doorstep she met Stefan face to face. He turned red. It shocked her to see a man blush. He spoke, as usual leaping straight into the subject—"You were the year behind me in school, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"You went around with Rosa Bayenin. She won the scholarship I did, the next year."

"She's teaching school now, in the Valone."

"She did more with it than I would have done.—I was thinking, see, it's

queer how you grow up in a place like this, you know everybody, then you meet one and find out you don't know them."

She did not know what to answer. He said good-bye and went into the house; she went on, retying her kerchief against the rising wind.

Rosana and the mother came into the house a minute after Stefan. "Who was that on the doorstep you were talking to?" the mother said sharply. "That wasn't Nona Katalny, I'll be bound."

"You're right," Stefan said.

"All right, but you watch out for that one, you're just the kind she'd like to get her claws into, and wouldn't that be fine, you could walk her puppydog whilst she entertains her ma's gentlemen boarders." She and Rosana both began to laugh their loud, dark laughter. "Who was it you were talking to, then?"

"What's it to you?" he shouted back. Their laughter enraged him; it was like a pelting with hard clattering rocks, too thick to dodge.

"What is it to me who's standing on my own doorstep, you want to know, I'll let you know what it is to me—" Words leapt to meet her anger as they did to all her passions. "You so high and mighty all the time with all your going off to college, but you came sneaking back quick enough to this house, didn't you, and I'll let you know I want to know who comes into this house—" Rosana was shouting, "I know who it was, it was Martin Sachik's sister!" Kostant loomed up suddenly beside the three of them, stooped and tall on his crutches: "Cut it out," he said, and they fell silent.

Nothing was said, then or later, to the mother or between the two brothers, about Ekata Sachik's having been in the house.

Martin took his sister to dine at the Bell, the café where officials of the Chorin Company and visitors from out of town went to dine. He was proud of himself for having thought of treating her, proud of the white tableclothes and the forks and soup spoons, terrified of the waiter. He in his outgrown Sunday coat and his sister in her grey dress, how admirably

they were behaving, how adult they were. Ekata looked at the menu so calmly, and her face did not change expression in the slightest as she murmured to him, "But there's two kinds of soup."

"Yes," he said, with sophistication.

"Do you choose which kind?"

"I guess so."

"You must, you'd bloat up before you ever got to the meat—" They snickered. Ekata's shoulders shook; she hid her face in her napkin; the napkin was enormous—"Martin, look, they've given me a bedsheet—" They both sat snorting, shaking, in torment, while the waiter, with another bedsheet on his shoulder, inexorably approached.

Dinner was ordered inaudibly, eaten with etiquette, elbows pressed close to the sides. The dessert was a chestnut-flour pudding, and Ekata, her elbows relaxing a little with enjoyment, said, "Rosa Bayenin said when she wrote the town she's in is right next to a whole forest of chestnut trees, everybody goes and picks them up in autumn, the trees grow thick as night, she said, right down to the river bank." Town after six weeks on the farm, the talk with Kostant and Stefan, dining at the restaurant had excited her. "This is awfully good," she said, but she could not say what she saw, which was sunlight striking golden down a river between endless dark-foliaged trees, a wind running upriver among shadows and the scent of leaves, of water, and of chestnut-flour pudding, a world of forests, of rivers, of strangers, the sunlight shining on the world.

"Saw you talking with Stefan Fabbre," Martin said.

"I was at their house."

"What for?"

"They asked me."

"What for?"

"Just to find out how we're getting on."

"They never asked me."

"You're not on the farm, stupid. You're in his crew, aren't you? You

could look in sometime, you know. He's a grand man, you'd like him."

Martin grunted. He resented Ekata's visit to the Fabbres without knowing why. It seemed somehow to complicate things. Rosana had probably been there. He did not want his sister knowing about Rosana. Knowing what about Rosana? He gave it up, scowling.

"The younger brother, Stefan, he works at the Chorin office, doesn't he?"

"Keeps books or something. He was supposed to be a genius and go to college, but they kicked him out."

"I know." She finished her pudding, lovingly. "Everybody knows that," she said.

"I don't like him," Martin said.

"Why not?"

"Just don't." He was relieved, having dumped his ill humor onto Stefan. "You want coffee?"

"Oh, no."

"Come on. I do." Masterful, he ordered coffee for both. Ekata admired him, and enjoyed the coffee. "What luck, to have a brother," she said. The next morning, Sunday, Martin met her at the hotel and they went to church; singing the Lutheran hymns each heard the other's strong clear voice and each was pleased and wanted to laugh. Stefan Fabbre was at the service. "Does he usually come?" Ekata asked Martin as they left the church.

"No," Martin said, though he had no idea, having not been to church himself since May. He felt dull and fierce after the long sermon. "He's following you around."

She said nothing.

"He waited for you at the hotel, you said. Takes you out to see his brother, he says. Talks to you on the street. Shows up in church." Self-defense furnished him these items one after another, and the speaking of them convinced him.

"Martin," Ekata said, "if there's one kind of man I hate it's a meddler."

“If you weren’t my sister—”

“If I wasn’t your sister I’d be spared your stupidity. Will you go ask the man to put the horse in?” So they parted with mild rancor between them, soon lost in distance and the days.

In late November when Ekata drove in again to Sfaroy Kampe she went to the Fabbre house. She wanted to go, and had told Kostant she would, yet she had to force herself; and when she found that Kostant and Rosana were home, but Stefan was not, she felt much easier. Martin had troubled her with his stupid meddling. It was Kostant she wanted to see, anyhow.

But Kostant wanted to talk about Stefan.

“He’s always out roaming, or at the Lion. Restless. Wastes his time. He said to me, one day we talked, he’s afraid to leave Kampe. I’ve thought about what he meant. What is it he’s afraid of?”

“Well, he hasn’t any friends but here.”

“Few enough here. He acts the clerk among the quarrymen, and the quarryman among the clerks. I’ve seen him, here, when my mates come in. Why don’t he be what he is?”

“Maybe he isn’t sure what he is.”

“He won’t learn it from mooning around and drinking at the Lion,” said Kostant, hard and sure in his own intactness. “And rubbing up quarrels. He’s had three fights this month. Lost ’em all, poor devil,” and he laughed. She never expected the innocence of laughter on his grave face. And he was kind; his concern for Stefan was deep, his laughter without a sneer, the laughter of a good nature. Like Stefan, she wondered at him, at his beauty and his strength, but she did not think of him as wasted. The Lord keeps the house and knows his servants. If he had sent this innocent and splendid man to live obscure on the plain of stone, it was part of his housekeeping, of the strange economy of the stone and the rose, the rivers that run and do not run dry, the tiger, the ocean, the maggot, and the not eternal stars.

Rosana, by the hearth, listened to them talk. She sat silent, heavy

and her shoulders stooped, though of late she had been learning again to hold herself erect as she had when she was a child, a year ago. They say one gets used to being a millionaire; so after a year or two a human being begins to get used to being a woman. Rosana was learning to wear the rich and heavy garment of her inheritance. Just now she was listening, something she had rarely done. She had never heard adults talk as these two were talking. She had never heard a conversation. At the end of twenty minutes she slipped quietly out. She had learned enough, too much, she needed time to absorb and practice. She began practicing at once. She went down the street erect, not slow and not fast, her face composed, like Ekata Sachik.

“Daydreaming, Ros?” jeered Martin Sachik from the Katalny yard.

She smiled at him and said, “Hello, Martin.” He stood staring.

“Where you going?” he asked with caution.

“Nowhere; I’m just walking. Your sister’s at our house.”

“She is?” Martin sounded unusually stupid and belligerent, but she stuck to her practicing: “Yes,” she said politely. “She came to see my brother.”

“Which brother?”

“Kostant, why would she have come to see Stefan?” she said, forgetting her new self a moment and grinning widely.

“How come you’re barging around all by yourself?”

“Why not?” she said, stung by “barging” and so reverting to an extreme mildness of tone.

“I’ll go with you.”

“Why not?”

They walked down Gulhelm Street till it became a track between weeds.

“Want to go on to the West Pit?”

“Why not?” Rosana liked the phrase; it sounded experienced.

They walked on the thin stony dirt between miles of dead grass too short to bow to the northwest wind. Enormous masses of cloud travelled backward over their heads so that they seemed to be walking very fast, the

grey plain sliding along with them. "Clouds make you dizzy," Martin said, "like looking up a flagpole." They walked with faces upturned, seeing nothing but the motion of the wind. Rosana realised that though their feet were on the earth they themselves stuck up into the sky, it was the sky they were walking through, just as birds flew through it. She looked over at Martin walking through the sky.

They came to the abandoned quarry and stood looking down at the water, dulled by flurries of trapped wind.

"Want to go swimming?"

"Why not?"

"There's the mule trail. Looks funny, don't it, going right down into the water."

"It's cold here."

"Come on down the trail. There's no wind inside the walls hardly. That's where Penik jumped off from, they grappled him up from right under here."

Rosana stood on the lip of the pit. The grey wind blew by her. "Do you think he meant to? I mean, he was blind, maybe he fell in—"

"He could see some. They were going to send him to Brailava and operate on him. Come on." She followed him to the beginning of the path down. It looked very steep from above. She had become timorous the last year. She followed him slowly down the effaced, boulder-smashed track into the quarry. "Here, hold on," he said, pausing at a rough drop; he took her hand and brought her down after him. They separated at once and he led on to where the water cut across the path, which plunged on down to the hidden floor of the quarry. The water was lead-dark, uneasy, its surface broken into thousands of tiny pleatings, circles, counter-circles by the faint trapped wind jarring it ceaselessly against the walls. "Shall I go on?" Martin whispered, loud in the silence.

"Why not?"

He walked on. She cried, "Stop!" He had walked into the water up to

his knees; he turned, lost his balance, careened back onto the path with a plunge that showered her with water and sent clapping echoes round the walls of rock. "You're crazy, what did you do that for?" Martin sat down, took off his big shoes to dump water out of them, and laughed, a soundless laugh mixed with shivering. "What did you do that for?"

"Felt like it," he said. He caught at her arm, pulled her down kneeling by him, and kissed her. The kiss went on. She began to struggle, and pulled away from him. He hardly knew it. He lay there on the rocks at the water's edge laughing; he was as strong as the earth and could not lift his hand. . . . He sat up, mouth open, eyes unfocussed. After a while he put on his wet, heavy shoes and started up the path. She stood at the top, a windblown stroke of darkness against the huge moving sky. "Come on!" she shouted, and wind thinned her voice to a knife's edge. "Come on, you can't catch me!" As he neared the top of the path, she ran. He ran, weighed down by his wet shoes and trousers. A hundred yards from the quarry he caught her and tried to capture both her arms. Her wild face was next to his for a moment. She twisted free, ran off again, and he followed her into town, trotting since he could not run any more. Where Gulhelm Street began she stopped and waited for him. They walked down the pavement side by side. "You look like a drowned cat," she jeered in a panting whisper. "Who's talking," he answered the same way, "look at the mud on your skirt." In front of the boarding house they stopped and looked at each other, and he laughed. "Good night, Ros!" he said. She wanted to bite him. "Good night!" she said, and walked the few yards to her own front door, not slow and not fast, feeling his gaze on her back like a hand on her flesh.

Not finding her brother at the boarding house, Ekata had gone back to the hotel to wait for him; they were to dine at the Bell again. She told the desk clerk to send her brother up when he came. In a few minutes there was a knock; she opened the door. It was Stefan Fabbre. He was the color of oatmeal and looked dingy, like an unmade bed.

“I wanted to ask you . . .” His voice slurred off. “Have some dinner,” he muttered, looking past her at the room.

“My brother’s coming for me. That’s him now.” But it was the hotel manager coming up the stairs. “Sorry, miss,” he said loudly. “There’s a parlour downstairs.” Ekata stared at him blankly. “Now look, miss, you said to send up your brother, and the clerk he don’t know your brother by sight, but I do. That’s my business. There’s a nice parlour downstairs for entertaining. All right? You want to come to a respectable hotel, I want to keep it respectable for you, see?”

Stefan pushed past him and blundered down the stairs. “He’s drunk, miss,” said the manager.

“Go away,” Ekata said, and shut the door on him. She sat down on the bed with clenched hands, but she could not sit still. She jumped up, took up her coat and kerchief, and without putting them on ran downstairs and out, hurling the key onto the desk behind which the manager stood staring. Ardure Street was dark between pools of lamplight, and the winter wind blew down it. She walked the two blocks west, came back down the other side of the street the length of it, eight blocks; she passed the White Lion, but the winter door was up and she could not see in. It was cold, the wind ran through the streets like a river running. She went to Gulhelm Street and met Martin coming out of the boarding house. They went to the Bell for supper. Both were thoughtful and uneasy. They spoke little and gently, grateful for companionship.

Alone in church next morning, when she had made sure that Stefan was not there, she lowered her eyes in relief. The stone walls of the church and the stark words of the service stood strong around her. She rested like a ship in haven. Then as the pastor gave his text, “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my help,” she shivered, and once again looked all about the church, moving her head and eyes slowly, surreptitiously, seeking him. She heard nothing of the sermon. But when the service was over she did not want to leave the church. She

went out among the last of the congregation. The pastor detained her, asking about her mother. She saw Stefan waiting at the foot of the steps.

She went to him.

“Wanted to apologise for last night,” he brought out all in one piece. “It’s all right.”

He was bareheaded and the wind blew his light, dusty-looking hair across his eyes; he winced and tried to smooth it back. “I was drunk,” he said.

“I know.”

They set off together.

“I was worried about you,” Ekata said.

“What for? I wasn’t that drunk.”

“I don’t know.”

They crossed the street in silence.

“Kostant likes talking with you. Told me so.” His tone was unpleasant. Ekata said drily, “I like talking with him.”

“Everybody does. It’s a great favor he does them.”

She did not reply.

“I mean that.”

She knew what he meant, but still did not say anything. They were near the hotel. He stopped. “I won’t finish ruining your reputation.”

“You don’t have to grin about it.”

“I’m not. I mean I won’t go on to the hotel with you, in case it embarrassed you.”

“I have nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“I do, and I am. I am sorry, Ekata.”

“I didn’t mean you had to apologise again.” Her voice turned husky so that he thought again of mist, dusk, the forests.

“I won’t.” He laughed. “Are you leaving right away?”

“I have to. It gets dark so early now.”

They both hesitated.

"You could do me a favor," she said.

"I'd do that."

"If you'd see to having my horse put in, last time I had to stop after a mile and tighten everything. If you did that I could be getting ready."

When she came out of the hotel the wagon was out front and he was in the seat. "I'll drive you a mile or two, all right?" She nodded, he gave her a hand up; they drove down Ardure Street westward to the plain.

"That damned hotel manager," Ekata said. "Grinning and scraping this morning . . ."

Stefan laughed, but said nothing. He was cautious, absorbed; the cold wind blew, the old roan clopped along; he explained presently, "I've never driven before."

"I've never driven any horse but this one. He's never any trouble."

The wind whistled in miles of dead grass, tugged at her black kerchief, whipped Stefan's hair across his eyes.

"Look at it," he said softly. "A couple of inches of dirt, and under it rock. Drive all day, any direction, and you'll find rock, with a couple of inches of dirt on it. You know how many trees there are in Kampe? Fifty-four. I counted 'em. And not another, not one, all the way to the mountains." His voice as he talked as if to himself was dry and musical. "When I went to Brailava on the train I looked out for the first new tree. The fifty-fifth tree. It was a big oak by a farmhouse in the hills. Then all of a sudden there were trees everywhere, in all the valleys in the hills. You could never count 'em. But I'd like to try."

"You're sick of it here."

"I don't know. Sick of something. I feel like I was an ant, something smaller, so small you can hardly see it, crawling along on this huge floor. Getting nowhere because where is there to get. Look at us now, crawling across the floor, there's the ceiling. . . . Looks like snow, there in the north."

"Not before dark, I hope."

“What’s it like on the farm?”

She considered some while before answering, and then said softly, “Closed in.”

“Your father happy with it?”

“He never did feel easy in Kampe, I think.”

“There’s people made out of dirt, earth,” he said in his voice that slurred away so easily into unheard monologue, “and then there’s some made out of stone. The fellows who get on in Kampe are made out of stone.” “Like my brother,” he did not say, and she heard it.

“Why don’t you leave?”

“That’s what Kostant said. It sounds so easy. But see, if he left, he’d be taking himself with him. I’d be taking myself. . . . Does it matter where you go? All you have is what you are. Or what you meet.”

He checked the horse. “I’d better hop off, we must have come a couple of miles. Look, there’s the ant-heap.” From the high wagon seat looking back they saw a darkness on the pale plain, a pinpoint spire, a glitter where the winter sun struck windows or roof-slates; and far behind the town, distinct under high, heavy, dark-grey clouds, the mountains.

He handed the traces to her. “Thanks for the lift,” he said, and swung down from the seat.

“Thanks for the company, Stefan.”

He raised his hand; she drove on. It seemed a cruel thing to do, to leave him on foot there on the plain. When she looked back she saw him far behind already, walking away from her between the narrowing wheel-ruts under the enormous sky.

Before she reached the farm that evening there was a dry flurry of snow, the first of an early winter. From the kitchen window all that month she looked up at hills blurred with rain. In December from her bedroom, on days of sun after snow, she saw eastward across the plain a glittering pallor: the mountains. There were no more trips to Sfaroy Kampe. When they needed market goods her uncle drove to Verre or Lotima, bleak villages

foundering like cardboard in the rain. It was too easy to stray off the wheel-ruts crossing the karst in snow or heavy rain, he said, "and then where are ye?"

"Where are ye in the first place?" Ekata answered in Stefan's soft dry voice. The uncle paid no heed.

Martin rode out on a livery-stable horse for Christmas day. After a few hours he got sullen and stuck to Ekata. "What's that thing Aunt's got hanging round her neck?"

"A nail through an onion. To keep off rheumatism."

"Christ Almighty!"

Ekata laughed.

"The whole place stinks of onion and flannel, can't you air it out?"

"No. Cold days they even close the chimney flues. Rather have the smoke than the cold."

"You ought to come back to town with me, Ekata."

"Ma's not well."

"You can't help that."

"No. But I'd feel mean to leave her without good reason. First things first." Ekata had lost weight; her cheekbones stood out and her eyes looked darker. "How's it going with you?" she asked presently.

"All right. We've been laid off a good bit, the snow."

"You've been growing up," Ekata said.

"I know."

He sat on the stiff farm-parlour sofa with a man's weight, a man's quietness.

"You walking out with anybody?"

"No." They both laughed. "Listen, I saw Fabbre, and he said to wish you joy of the season. He's better. Gets outside now, with a cane."

Their cousin came through the room. She wore a man's old boots stuffed with straw for warmth getting about in the ice and mud of the farmyard. Martin looked after her with disgust. "I had a talk with him.

Couple of weeks ago. I hope he's back in the pits by Easter like they say. He's my foreman, you know." Looking at him, Ekata saw who it was he was in love with.

"I'm glad you like him."

"There isn't a man in Kampe comes up to his shoulder. You liked him, didn't you?"

"Of course I did."

"See, when he asked about you, I thought—"

"You thought wrong," Ekata said. "Will you quit meddling, Martin?"

"I didn't say anything," he defended himself feebly; his sister could still overawe him. He also recalled that Rosana Fabbre had laughed at him when he had said something to her about Kostant and Ekata. She had been hanging out sheets in the back yard on a whipping-bright winter morning a few days ago, he had hung over the back fence talking to her. "Oh Lord, are you crazy?" she had jeered, while the damp sheets on the line billowed at her face and the wind tangled her hair. "Those two? Not on your life!" He had tried to argue; she would not listen. "He's not going to marry anybody from here. There's going to be some woman from far off, from Krasnoy maybe, a manager's wife, a queen, a beauty, with servants and all. And one day she'll be coming down Ardure Street with her nose in the air and she'll see Kostant coming with his nose in the air, and crack! that's it."

"That's what?" said he, fascinated by her fortune-teller's conviction.

"I don't know!" she said, and hoisted up another sheet. "Maybe they'll run off together. Maybe something else. All I know is Kostant knows what's coming to him, and he's going to wait for it."

"All right, if you know so much, what's coming your way?"

She opened her mouth wide in a big grin, her dark eyes under long dark brows flashed at him. "Men," she said like a cat hissing, and the sheets and shirts snapped and billowed around her, white in the flashing sunlight.

January passed, covering the surly plain with snow, February with a grey sky moving slowly over the plain from north to south day after day: a hard winter and a long one. Kostant Fabbre got a lift sometimes on a cart to the Chorin quarries north of town, and would stand watching the work, the teams of men and lines of wagons, the shunting box-cars, the white of snow and the dull white of new-cut limestone. Men would come up to the tall man leaning on his cane to ask him how he did, when he was coming back to work. "A few weeks yet," he would say. The company was keeping him laid off till April as their insurers requested. He felt fit, he could walk back to town without using his cane, it fretted him bitterly to be idle. He would go back, to the White Lion, and sit there in the smoky dark and warmth till the quarrymen came in, off work at four because of snow and darkness, big heavy men making the place steam with the heat of their bodies and buzz with the mutter of their voices. At five Stefan would come in, slight, with white shirt and light shoes, a queer figure among the quarriers. He usually came to Kostant's table, but they were not on good terms. Each was waiting and impatient.

"Evening," Martin Sachik said passing the table, a tired burly lad, smiling. "Evening, Stefan."

"I'm Fabbre and Mr. to you, laddie," Stefan said in his soft voice that yet stood out against the comfortable hive-mutter. Martin, already past, chose to pay no attention.

"Why are you down on that one?"

"Because I don't choose to be on first names with every man's brat that goes down in the pits. Nor every man either. D'you take me for the town idiot?"

"You act like it, times," Kostant said, draining his beer mug.

"I've had enough of your advice."

"I've had enough of your conceit. Go to the Bell if the company here don't suit you."

Stefan got up, slapped money on the table, and went out.

It was the first of March; the north half of the sky over the streets was heavy, without light; its edge was silvery blue, and from it south to the horizon the air was blue and empty except for a fingernail moon over the western hills and, near it, the evening star. Stefan went silent through the streets, a silent wind at his back. Indoors, the walls of the house enclosed his rage; it became a square, dark, musty thing full of the angles of tables and chairs, and flared up yellow with the kerosene lamp. The chimney of the lamp slithered out of his hand like a live animal, smashed itself shrilly against the corner of the table. He was on all fours picking up bits of glass when his brother came in.

“What did you follow me for?”

“I came to my own house.”

“Do I have to go back to the Lion then?”

“Go where you damned well like.” Kostant sat down and picked up yesterday’s newspaper. Stefan, kneeling, broken glass on the palm of his hand, spoke: “Listen. I know why you want me patting young Sachik on the head. For one thing he thinks you’re God Almighty, and that’s agreeable. For another thing he’s got a sister. And you want ’em all eating out of your hand, don’t you? Like they all do? Well by God here’s one that won’t, and you might find your game spoiled, too.” He got up and went to the kitchen, to the trash basket that stood by the week’s heap of dirty clothes, and dropped the glass of the broken lamp into the basket. He stood looking at his hand: a sliver of glass bristled from the inner joint of his second finger. He had clenched his hand on the glass as he spoke to Kostant. He pulled out the sliver and put the bleeding finger to his mouth. Kostant came in. “What game, Stefan?” he said.

“You know what I mean.”

“Say what you mean.”

“I mean her. Ekata. What do you want her for anyhow? You don’t need her. You don’t need anything. You’re the big tin god.”

“You shut your mouth.”

“Don’t give me orders! By God I can give orders too. You just stay away from her. I’ll get her and you won’t, I’ll get her under your nose, under your eyes—” Kostant’s big hands took hold of his shoulders and shook him till his head snapped back and forth on his neck. He broke free and drove his fist straight at Kostant’s face, but as he did so he felt a jolt as when a train-car is coupled to the train. He fell down backwards across the heap of dirty clothes. His head hit the floor with a dead sound like a dropped melon.

Kostant stood with his back against the stove. He looked at his right-hand knuckles, then at Stefan’s face, which was dead white and curiously serene. Kostant took a pillowcase from the pile of clothes, wet it at the sink, and knelt down by Stefan. It was hard for him to kneel, the right leg was still stiff. He mopped away the thin dark line of blood that had run from Stefan’s mouth. Stefan’s face twitched, he sighed and blinked, and looked up at Kostant, gazing with vague, sliding recognition, like a young infant.

“That’s better,” Kostant said. His own face was white.

Stefan propped himself up on one arm. “I fell down,” he said in a faint, surprised voice. Then he looked at Kostant again and his face began to change and tighten.

“Stefan—”

Stefan got up on all fours, then onto his feet; Kostant tried to take his arm, but he stumbled to the door, struggled with the catch, and plunged out. At the door, Kostant watched him vault the fence, cut across the Katalny yard, and run down Gulhelm Street with long, jolting strides. For several minutes the elder brother stood in the doorway, his face rigid and sorrowful. Then he turned, went to the front door and out, and made off down Gulhelm Street as fast as he could. The black cloud-front had covered all the sky but a thin band of blue-green to the south; the moon and stars were gone. Kostant followed the track over the plain

to the West Pit. No one was ahead of him. He reached the lip of the quarry and saw the water quiet, dim, reflecting snow that had yet to fall. He called out once, "Stefan!" His lungs were raw and his throat dry from the effort he had made to run. There was no answer. It was not his brother's name that need be called there at the lip of the ruined quarry. It was the wrong name, and the wrong time. Kostant turned and started back towards Gulhelm Street, walking slowly and a little lame.

"I've got to ride to Kolle," Stefan said. The livery-stable keeper stared at his blood-smearred chin.

"It's dark. There's ice on the roads."

"You must have a sharp-shod horse. I'll pay double."

"Well . . ."

Stefan rode out of the stable yard, and turned right down Ardure Street towards Verre instead of left towards Kolle. The keeper shouted after him. Stefan kicked the horse, which fell into a trot and then, where the pavement ceased, into a heavy run. The band of blue-green light in the southwest veered and slid away, Stefan thought he was falling sideways, he clung to the pommel but did not pull the reins. When the horse ran itself out and slowed to a walk it was full night, earth and sky all dark. The horse snorted, the saddle creaked, the wind hissed in frozen grass. Stefan dismounted and searched the ground as best he could. The horse had kept to the wagon road and stood not four feet from the ruts. They went on, horse and man; mounted, the man could not see the ruts; he let the horse follow the track across the plain, himself following no road.

After a long time in the rocking dark something touched his face once, lightly.

He felt his cheek. The right side of his jaw was swollen and stiff, and his right hand holding the reins was locked by the cold, so that when he tried to change his grip he did not know if his fingers moved or not. He had no gloves, though he wore the winter coat he had never taken off when he came into the house, when the lamp broke, a long time ago. He

got the reins in his left hand and put the right inside his coat to warm it. The horse jogged on patiently, head low. Again something touched Stefan's face very lightly, brushing his cheek, his hot sore lip. He could not see the flakes. They were soft and did not feel cold. He waited for the gentle, random touch of the snow. He changed hands on the reins again, and put the left hand under the horse's coarse, damp mane, on the warm hide. They both took comfort in the touch. Trying to see ahead, Stefan knew where sky and horizon met, or thought he did, but the plain was gone. The ceiling of sky was gone. The horse walked on darkness, under darkness, through darkness.

Once the word "lost" lit itself like a match in the darkness, and Stefan tried to stop the horse so he could get off and search for the wheel-ruts, but the horse kept walking on. Stefan let his numb hand holding the reins rest on the pommel, let himself be borne.

The horse's head came up, its gait changed for a few steps. Stefan clutched at the wet mane, raised his own head dizzily, blinked at a spider-web of light tangled in his eyes. Through the splintery blur of ice on his lashes the light grew square and yellowish: a window. What house stood out alone here on the endless plain? Dim blocks of pallor rose up on both sides of him—storefronts, a street. He had come to Verre. The horse stopped and sighed so that the girths creaked loudly. Stefan did not remember leaving Sfaroy Kampe. He sat astride a sweating horse in a dark street somewhere. One window was alight in a second storey. Snow fell in sparse clumps, as if hurled down in handfuls. There was little on the ground, it melted as it touched, a spring snow. He rode to the house with the lighted window and called aloud, "Where's the road to Lotima?"

The door opened, snow flickered whirling in the shaft of light. "Are ye the doctor?"

"No. How do I get on to Lotima?"

"Next turn right. If ye meet the doctor tell him hurry on!"

The horse left the village unwillingly, lame on one leg and then the other. Stefan kept his head raised looking for the dawn, which surely must be near. He rode north now, the snow blowing in his face, blinding him even to the darkness. The road climbed, went down, climbed again. The horse stopped, and when Stefan did nothing, turned left, made a couple of stumbling steps, stopped again shuddering and neighed. Stefan dismounted, falling to hands and knees because his legs were too stiff at first to hold him. There was a cattle-guard of poles laid across a side-road. He let the horse stand and felt his way up the side-road to a sudden house lifting a dark wall and snowy roof above him. He found the door, knocked, waited, knocked; a window rattled, a woman said frightened to death over his head, "Who's that?"

"Is this the Sachik farm?"

"No! Who's that?"

"Have I passed the Sachiks'?"

"Are ye the doctor?"

"Yes."

"It's the next but one on the left side. Want a lantern, doctor?"

She came downstairs and gave him a lantern and matches; she held a candle, which dazzled his eyes so that he never saw her face.

He went at the horse's head now, the lantern in his left hand and the reins in his right, held close to the bridle. The horse's docile, patient, stumbling walk, the liquid darkness of its eye in the gleam of the lantern, grieved Stefan sorely. They walked ahead very slowly and he looked for the dawn.

A farmhouse flickered to his left when he was almost past it; snow, windplastered on its north wall, caught the light of the lantern. He led the horse back. The hinges of the gate squealed. Dark outbuildings crowded round. He knocked, waited, knocked. A light moved inside the house, the door opened, again a candle held at eye-level dazzled him.

"Who is that?"

“That’s you, Ekata,” he said.

“Who is that? Stefan?”

“I must have missed the other farm, the one in between.”

“Come in—”

“The horse. Is that the stable?”

“There, to the left—”

He was all right while he found a stall for the horse, robbed the Sachiks’ roan of some hay and water, found a sack and rubbed the horse down a bit; he did all that very well, he thought, but when he got back to the house his knees went weak and he could scarcely see the room or Ekata who took his hand to bring him in. She had on a coat over something white, a nightgown. “Oh lad,” she said, “you rode from Kampe tonight?”

“Poor old horse,” he said, and smiled. His voice said the words some while after he thought he had said them. He sat down on the sofa.

“Wait there,” she said. It seemed she left the room for a while, then she was putting a cup of something in his hands. He drank; it was hot; the sting of brandy woke him long enough to watch her stir up the buried coals and put wood on the fire. “I wanted to talk to you, see,” he said, and then he fell asleep.

She took off his shoes, put his legs up on the sofa, got a blanket and put it over him, tended the reluctant fire. He never stirred. She turned out the lamp and slipped back upstairs in the dark. Her bed was by the window of her attic room, and she could see or feel that it was now snowing soft and thick in the dark outside.

She roused to a knock and sat up seeing the even light of snow on walls and ceiling. Her uncle peered in. He was wearing yellowish-white woolen underwear and his hair stuck up like fine wire around his bald spot. The whites of his eyes were the same color as his underwear. “Who’s that downstairs?”

Ekata explained to Stefan, somewhat later in the morning, that he was

on his way to Lotima on business for the Chorin Company, that he had started from Kampe at noon and been held up by a stone in his horse's shoe and then by the snow.

"Why?" he said, evidently confused, his face looking rather childish with fatigue and sleep.

"I had to tell them something."

He scratched his head. "What time did I get here?"

"About two in the morning."

He remembered how he had looked for the dawn, hours away.

"What did you come for?" Ekata said. She was clearing the breakfast table; her face was stern, though she spoke softly.

"I had a fight," Stefan said. "With Kostant."

She stopped, holding two plates, and looked at him.

"You don't think I hurt him?" He laughed. He was lightheaded, tired out, serene. "He knocked me cold. You don't think I could have beat him?"

"I don't know," Ekata said with distress.

"I always lose fights," Stefan said. "And run away."

The deaf man came through, dressed to go outside in heavy boots, an old coat made of blanketing; it was still snowing. "Ye'll not get on to Lotima today, Mr. Stefan," he said in his loud even voice, with satisfaction. "Tomas says the nag's lame on four legs." This had been discussed at breakfast, but the deaf man had not heard. He had not asked how Kostant was getting on, and when he did so later in the day it was with the same satisfied malice: "And your brother, he's down in the pits again, no doubt?" He did not try to hear the answer.

Stefan spent most of the day by the fire sleeping. Only Ekata's cousin was curious about him. She said to Ekata as they were cooking supper, "They say his brother is a handsome man."

"Kostant? The handsomest man I ever saw." Ekata smiled, chopping onions.

"I don't know as I'd call this one handsome," the cousin said tentatively.

The onions were making Ekata cry; she laughed, blew her nose, shook her head. "Oh no," she said.

After supper Stefan met Ekata as she came into the kitchen from dumping out peelings and swill for the pigs. She wore her father's coat, clogs on her shoes, her black kerchief. The freezing wind swept in with her till she wrestled the door shut. "It's clearing," she said, "the wind's from the south."

"Ekata, do you know what I came here for—"

"Do you know yourself?" she said, looking up at him as she set the bucket down.

"Yes, I do."

"Then I do, I suppose."

"There isn't anywhere," he said in rage as the uncle's clumping boots approached the kitchen.

"There's my room," she said impatiently. But the walls were thin, and the cousin slept in the next attic and her parents across the stairwell; she frowned angrily and said, "No. Wait till the morning."

In the morning, early, the cousin went off alone down the road. She was back in half an hour, her straw-stuffed boots smacking in the thawing snow and mud. The neighbor's wife at the next house but one had said, "He said he was the doctor, I asked who it was was sick with you. I gave him the lantern, it was so dark I didn't see his face, I thought it was the doctor, he said so." The cousin was munching the words sweetly, deciding whether to accost Stefan with them, or Ekata, or both before witnesses, when around a bend and down the snow-clotted, sun-bright grade of the road two horses came at a long trot: the livery-stable horse and the farm's old roan. Stefan and Ekata rode; they were both laughing. "Where ye going?" the cousin shouted, trembling. "Running away," the young man called back, and they went past her, splashing the puddles into diamond-slivers in the sunlight of March, and were gone.

A W E E K
I N T H E
C O U N T R Y

ON A SUNNY MORNING OF 1962 IN CLEVELAND, OHIO, IT WAS raining in Krasnoy and the streets between grey walls were full of men. "It's raining down my neck in here," Kasimir complained, but his friend in the adjoining stall of the streetcorner W.C. did not hear him because he was also talking: "Historical necessity is a solecism, what is history except what had to happen? But you can't extend that. What happens next? God knows!" Kasimir followed him out, still buttoning his trousers, and looked at the small boy looking at the nine-foot-long black coffin leaning against the W.C. "What's in it?" the boy asked. "My great-aunt's body," Kasimir explained. He picked up the coffin, hurried on with Stefan Fabbre through the rain. "A farce, determinism's a farce. Anything to avoid awe. Show me a seed," Stefan Fabbre said stopping and pointing at Kasimir, "yes, I can tell you what it is, it's an apple seed. But can I tell you that an apple tree will grow from it? No! Because there's no freedom, we think there's a law. But there is no law. There's growth and death, delight and terror, an abyss, the rest we invent. We're going to miss the train." They jostled on up Tiypontiy Street, the rain fell harder. Stefan Fabbre strode swinging his briefcase, his mouth firmly closed, his white face shining wet. "Why didn't you take up the piccolo? Give me that

awhile," he said as Kasimir tangled with an office-worker running for a bus. "Science bearing the burden of Art," Kasimir said, "heavy, isn't it?" as his friend hoisted the case and lugged it on, frowning and by the time they reached West Station gasping. On the platform in rain and steam they ran as others ran, heard whistles shriek and urgent Sanskrit blare from loudspeakers, and lurched exhausted into the first car. The compartments were all empty. It was the other train that was pulling out, jammed, a suburban train. Theirs sat still for ten minutes. "Nobody on this train but us?" Stefan Fabbre asked, morose, standing at the window. Then with one high peep the walls slid away. Raindrops shook and merged on the pane, tracks interwove on a viaduct, the two young men stared into bedroom windows and at brick walls painted with enormous letters. Abruptly nothing was left in the rain-dark evening sliding backwards to the east but a line of hills, black against a colorless clearing sky.

"The country," Stefan Fabbre said.

He got out a biochemical journal from amongst socks and undershirts in his briefcase, put on dark-rimmed glasses, read. Kasimir pushed back wet hair that had fallen all over his forehead, read the sign on the windowsill that said *DO NOT LEAN OUT*, stared at the shaking walls and the rain shuddering on the window, dozed. He dreamed that walls were falling down around him. He woke scared as they pulled out of Okats. His friend sat looking out the window, white-faced and black-haired, confirming the isolation and disaster of Kasimir's dream. "Can't see anything," he said. "Night. Country's the only place where they have night left." He stared through the reflection of his own face into the night that filled his eyes with blessed darkness.

"So here we are on a train going to Aisnar," Kasimir said, "but we don't know that it's going to Aisnar. It might go to Peking."

"It might derail and we'll all be killed. And if we do come to Aisnar? What's Aisnar? Mere hearsay."—"That's morbid," Kasimir said, glimpsing again the walls collapsing.—"No, exhilarating," his friend answered.

“Takes a lot of work to hold the world together, when you look at it that way. But it’s worthwhile. Building up cities, holding up the roofs by an act of fidelity. Not faith. Fidelity.” He gazed out the window through his reflected eyes. Kasimir shared a bar of mud-like chocolate with him. They came to Aisnar.

Rain fell in the gold-paved, ill-lit streets while the autobus to Vermare and Prevne waited for its passengers in South Square under dripping sycamores. The case rode in the back seat. A chicken with a string round its neck scratched the aisle for grain, a bushy-haired woman held the other end of the string, a drunk farm-worker talked loudly to the driver as the bus groaned out of Aisnar southward into the country night, the same night, the blessed darkness.

“So I says to him, I says, you don’t know what’ll happen tomorrow—”

“Listen,” said Kasimir, “if the universe is infinite, does that mean that everything that could possibly happen, is happening, somewhere, at some time?”

“Saturday, he says, Saturday.”

“I don’t know. It would. But we don’t know what’s possible. Thank God. If we did, I’d shoot myself, eh?”

“Come back Saturday, he says, and I says, Saturday be damned, I says.”

In Vermare rain fell on the ruins of the Tower Keep, and the drunk got off leaving silence behind him. Stefan Fabbre looked glum, said he had a sore throat, and fell into a quick, weary sleep. His head jiggled to the ruts and bumps of the foothill road as the bus ran westward clearing a tunnel through solid black with its headlights. A tree, a great oak, bent down suddenly to shelter it. The doors opened admitting clean air, flashlights, boots and caps. Brushing back his fair hair Kasimir said softly, “Always happens. Only six miles from the border here.” They felt in their breast-pockets, handed over. “Fabbre Stefan, domicile 136 Tome Street, Krasnoy, student, MR 64100282A. Augeskar Kasimir, domicile 4 Sorden Street, Krasnoy, student, MR 80104944A. Where are you

going?”—“Prevne.”—“Both of you? Business?”—“Vacation. A week in the country.”—“What’s that?”—“A bass-viol case.”—“What’s in it?”—“A bass viol.” It was stood up, opened, closed again, lugged out, laid on the ground, opened again, and the huge viol stood fragile and magnificent among flashlights over the mud, boots, belt-buckles, caps. “Keep it off the ground!” Kasimir said in a sharp voice, and Stefan pushed in front of him. They fingered it, shook it. “Here, Kasi, does this unscrew?—No, there’s no way to take it apart.” The fat one slapped the great shining curve of wood saying something about his wife so that Stefan laughed, but the viol tilted in another’s hands, a tuning-peg squawked, and on the patter of rain and mutter of the bus-engine idling, a booming twang uncurled, broken off short like the viol-string. Stefan took hold of Kasimir’s arm. After the bus had started again they sat side by side in the warm stinking darkness. Kasimir said, “Sorry, Stefan. Thanks.”

“Can you fix it?”

“Yes, just the peg snapped. I can fix it.”

“Damn sore throat.” Stefan rubbed his head and left his hands over his eyes. “Taking cold. Damn rain.”

“We’re near Prevne now.”

In Prevne very fine rain drifted down one street between two street-lamps. Behind the roofs something loomed—treetops, hills? No one met them since Kasimir had forgotten to write which night they were coming. Returning from the one public telephone, he joined Stefan and the bass-viol case at a table of the Post-Telephone Bar. “Father has the car out on a call. We can walk or wait here. Sorry.” His long fair face was discouraged; contrite. “It’s a couple of miles.” They set off. They walked in silence up a dirt road in rain and darkness between fields. The air smelt of wet earth. Kasimir began to whistle but the rain wet his lips, he stopped. It was so dark that they walked slowly, not able to see where each step took them, whether the road was rough or plain. It was so still that they heard the multitudinous whisper of the rain on fields to left and right. They

were climbing. The hill loomed ahead of them, solider darkness. Stefan stopped to turn up his wet coatcollar and because he was dizzy. As he went forward again in the chill whispering country silence he heard a soft clear sound, a girl laughing behind the hill. Lights sprang up at the hillcrest, sparkling, waving. "What's that?" he said stopping unnerved in the broken dark. A child shouted, "There they are!" The lights above them danced and descended, they were encircled by lanterns, flashlights, voices calling, faces and arms lit by flashes and vanishing again into night; clearly once more, right at his side, the sweet laugh rang out. "Father didn't come back and you didn't come, so we all came to meet you."—"Did you bring your friend, where is he?"—"Hello, Kasi!" Kasimir's fair head bent to another in the gleam of a lantern. "Where's your fiddle, didn't you bring it?"—"It's been raining like this all week."—"Left it with Mr. Praspayets at the Post-Telephone."—"Let's go on and get it, it's lovely walking."—"I'm Bendika, are you Stefan?" She laughed as they sought each other's hands to shake in darkness; she turned her lantern round and was dark-haired, as tall as her brother, the only one of them he saw clearly before they all went back down the road talking, laughing, flashing lightbeams over the road and roadside weeds or up into the rain-thick air. He saw them all for a moment in the bar as Kasimir got his bull-fiddle: two boys, a man, tall Bendika, the young blonde one who had kissed Kasimir, another still younger, all of them he saw all at once and then they were off up the road again and he must wonder which of the three girls, or was it four, had laughed before they met. The chill rain picked at his hot face. Beside him, beaming a flashlight so they could see the road, the man said, "I'm Joachim Bret."—"Enzymes," Stefan replied hoarsely.—"Yes, what's your field?"—"Molecular genetics."—"No! too good! you work with Metor, then? Catch me up, will you? Do you see the American journals?" They talked helices for half a mile, Bret voluble, Stefan laconic as he was still dizzy and still listened for the laugh; but all of them laughed, he could not be sure. They all fell silent a moment, only

the two boys ran far ahead, calling. "There's the house," tall Bendika said beside him; pointing to a yellow gleam. "Still with us, Stefan?" Kasimir called from somewhere in the dark. He growled yes, resenting the silly good cheer, the running and calling and laughing, the enthusiastic jerky Bret, the yellow windows that to all of them were home but to him not. Inside the house they shed wet coats, spread, multiplied, regathered around a table in a high dark room shot through with noise and lamplight, for coffee and coffeecake borne in by Kasimir's mother. She walked hurried and tranquil under a grey and dark-brown coronet of braids. Bass-viol-shaped, mother of seven, she merged Stefan with all the other young people whom she distinguished one from another only by name. They were named Valeria, Bendika, Antony, Bruna, Kasimir, Joachim, Paul. They joked and chattered, the little dark girl screamed with laughter, Kasimir's fair hair fell over his eyes, the two boys of eleven squabbled, the gaunt smiling man sat with a guitar and presently played, his face beaked like a crow's over the instrument. His right hand plucking the strings was slightly crippled or deformed. They sang, all but Stefan who did not know the songs, had a sore throat, would not sing, sat rancorous amid the singers. Dr. Augeskar came in. He shook Kasimir's hand, welcoming and effacing him, a tall king with a slender and unlikely heir. "Where's your friend? Sorry I couldn't meet you, had an emergency up the road. Appendectomy on the dining table. Like carving the Christmas goose. Get to bed, Antony. Bendika, get me a glass. Joachim? You, Fabbre?" He poured out red wine and sat down with them at the great round table. They sang again. Augeskar suggested the songs, his voice led the others; he filled the room. The fair daughter flirted with him, the little dark one screeched with laughter, Bendika teased Kasimir, Bret sang a love-song in Swedish; it was only eleven o'clock. Dr. Augeskar had grey eyes, clear under blond brows. Stefan met their stare. "You've got a cold?"—"Yes."—"Then go to bed. Diana! where does Fabbre sleep?" Kasimir jumped up contrite, led Stefan upstairs

and through corridors and rooms all smelling of hay and rain. "When's breakfast?"—"Oh, anytime," for Kasimir never knew the time of any event. "Good night, Stefan." But it was a bad night, miserable, and all through it Bret's crippled hand snapped off one great coiling string after another with a booming twang while he explained, "This is how you go after them the latest," grinning. In the morning Stefan could not get up. Sunlit walls leaned inward over the bed and the sky came stretching in the windows, a huge blue balloon. He lay there. He hid his pin-stiff aching black hair under his hands and moaned. The tall golden-grey man came in and said to him with perfect certainty, "My boy, you're sick." It was balm. Sick, he was sick, the walls and sky were all right. "A very respectable fever you're running," said the doctor and Stefan smiled, near tears, feeling himself respectable, lapped in the broad indifferent tenderness of the big man who was kingly, certain, uncaring as sunlight in the sky. But in the forests and caves and small crowded rooms of his fever no sunlight came, and after a time no water.

The house stood quiet in the September sunlight and dark.

That night Mrs. Augeskar, yarn, needle, sock poised one moment in her hands, lifted her braid-crowned head, listening as she had listened years ago to her first son, Kasimir, crying out in sleep in his crib upstairs. "Poor child," she whispered. And Bruna raised her fair head listening too, for the first time, hearing the solitary cry from the forests where she had never been. The house stood still around them. On the second day the boys played outdoors till rain fell and night fell. Kasimir stood in the kitchen sawing on his bull-fiddle, his face by the shining neck of the instrument quiet and closed, keeping right on when others came in to perch on stools and lean against the sink and talk, for after all there were seven young people there on vacation, they could not stay silent. But under their voices the deep, weak, singing voice of Kasimir's fiddle went on wordless, like a cry from the depths of the forest; so that Bruna suddenly past patience and dependence, solitary, not the third daughter

and fourth child and one of the young people, slipped away and went upstairs to see what it was like, this grave sickness, this mortality.

It was not like anything. The young man slept. His face was white, his hair black on white linen: clear as printed words, but in a foreign language.

She came down and told her mother she had looked in, he was sleeping quietly; true enough, but not the truth. What she had confirmed up there was that she was now ready to learn the way through the forest; she had come of age, and was now capable of dying.

He was her guide, the young man who had come in out of the rain with a case of pneumonia. On the afternoon of the fifth day she went up to his room again. He was lying there getting well, weak and content, thinking about a morning ten years ago when he had walked out with his father and grandfather past the quarries, an April morning on a dry plain awash with sunlight and blue flowers. After they had passed the Chorin Company quarries they suddenly began to talk politics, and he understood that they had come out of town onto the empty plain in order to say things aloud, in order to let him hear what his father said: "There'll always be enough ants to fill up all the ant-hills—worker ants, army ants." And the grandfather, the dry, bitter, fitful man, in his seventies angrier and gentler than his son, vulnerable as his thirteen-year-old grandson: "Get out, Kosta, why don't you get out?" That was only a taunt. None of them would run away, or get away. A man, he walked with men across a barren plain blue with flowers in brief April; they shared with him their anger, their barren helpless obduracy and the brief blue fire of their anger. Talking aloud under the open sky, they gave him the key to the house of manhood, the prison where they lived and he would live. But they had known other houses. He had not. Once his grandfather, Stefan Fabbre, put his hand on young Stefan's shoulder while he spoke. "What would we do with freedom if we had it, Kosta? What has the West done with it? Eaten it. Put it in its belly. A great wondrous belly, that's the West. With a wise head on top of it, a man's head, with

a man's mind and eyes—but the rest all belly. He can't walk any more. He sits at table eating, eating, thinking up machines to bring him more food, more food. Throwing food to the black and yellow rats under the table so they won't gnaw down the walls around him. There he sits, and here we are, with nothing in our bellies but air, air and cancer, air and rage. We can still walk. So we're yoked. Yoked to the foreign plow. When we smell food we bray and kick. —Are we men, though, Kosta? I doubt it." All the time his hand lay on the boy's shoulder, tender, almost deferent, because the boy had never seen his inheritance at all but had been born in jail, where nothing is any good, no anger, understanding, or pride, nothing is any good except obduracy, except fidelity. Those remain, said the weight of the old man's hand on his shoulder. So when a blonde girl came into his room where he lay weak and content, he looked at her from that sunwashed barren April plain with trust and welcome, it being irrelevant to this moment that his grandfather had died in a deportation train and his father had been shot along with forty-two other men on the plain outside town in the reprisals of 1956. "How do you feel?" she said, and he said, "Fine."

"Can I bring you anything?"

He shook his head, the same black-and-white head she had seen clear and unintelligible as Greek words on a white page, but now his eyes were open and he spoke her language. It was the same voice that had called faintly from the black woods of fever, the neighborhood of death, a few nights ago, which now said, "I can't remember your name." He was very nice, he was a nice fellow, this Stefan Fabbre, embarrassed by lying there sick, glad to see her. "I'm Bruna, I come next after Kasi. Would you like some books? Are you getting bored yet?"—"Bored? No. You don't know how good it is to lie here doing nothing, I've never done that. Your parents are so kind, and this big house, and the fields outside there—I lie here thinking, Jesus, is this me? In all this peace, in all this space, in a room to myself doing nothing?" She laughed, by which he knew her:

the one who had laughed in rain and darkness before lights broke over the hill. Her fair hair was parted in the middle and waved on each side down nearly to the light, thick eyebrows; her eyes were an indeterminate color, unclear, grey-brown or grey. He heard it now indoors in daylight, the tender and exultant laugh. "Oh you beauty, you fine proud filly-foal never broken to harness, you scared and restive, gentle girl laughing. . . ."

Wanting to keep her he asked, "Have you always lived here?" and she said, "Yes, summers," glancing at him from her indeterminate, shining eyes in the shadow of fair hair. "Where did you grow up?"

"In Sfaroy Kampe, up north."

"Your family's still there?"

"My sister lives there." She still asked about families. She must be very innocent, more elusive and intact even than Kasimir, who placed his reality beyond the touch of any hands or asking of identity. Still to keep her with him, he said, "I lie here thinking. I've thought more already today than in the last three years."

"What do you think of?"

"Of the Hungarian nobleman, do you know that story? The one that was taken prisoner by the Turks, and sold as a slave. It was in the sixteenth century. Well, a Turk bought him, and yoked him to a plow, like an ox, and he plowed the fields, driven with a whip. His family finally managed to buy him back. And he went home, and got his sword, and went back to the battlefields. And there he took prisoner the Turk that had bought him, owned him. Took the Turk back to his manor. Took the chains off him, had him brought outside. And the poor Turk looked around for the impaling stake, you know, or the pitch they'd rub on him and set fire to, or the dogs, or at least the whip. But there was nothing. Only the Hungarian, the man he'd bought and sold. And the Hungarian said, 'Go on back home. . . .'"

"Did he go?"

"No, he stayed and turned Christian. But that's not why I think of it."

“Why do you?”

“I’d like to be a nobleman,” Stefan Fabbre said, grinning. He was a tough, hard fellow, lying there nearly defeated but not defeated. He grinned, his eyes had a black flicker to them; at twenty-five he had no innocence, no confidence, no hope at all of profit. The lack of that was the black flicker, the coldness in his eyes. Yet he lay there taking what came, a small man but hard, possessing weight, a man of substance. The girl looked at his strong, blunt hands on the blanket and then up at the sunlit windows, thinking of his being a nobleman, thinking of the one fact she knew of him from Kasimir, who seldom mentioned facts: that he shared a tenement room in Krasnoy with five other students, three beds were all they could fit into it. The room, with three high windows, curtains pulled back, hummed with the silence of September afternoon in the country. A boy’s voice rang out from fields far away. “Not much chance of it these days,” she said in a dull soft voice, looking down, meaning nothing, for once wholly cast down, tired, without tenderness or exultation. He would get well, would go back a week late to the city, to the three bedsteads and five roommates, shoes on the floor and rust and hairs in the washbasin, classrooms, laboratories, after that employment as an inspector of sanitation on State farms in the north and northeast, a two-room flat in State housing on the outskirts of a town near the State foundries, a black-haired wife who taught the third grade from State-approved textbooks, one child, two legal abortions, and the hydrogen bomb. Oh was there no way out, no way? “Are you very clever?”

“I’m very good at my work.”

“It’s science, isn’t it?”

“Biology. Research.”

Then the laboratories would persist; the flat became perhaps a four-room flat in the Krasnoy suburbs; two children, no abortions, two-week vacations in summer in the mountains, then the hydrogen bomb. Or no hydrogen bomb. It made no difference.

“What do you do research on?”

“Certain molecules. The molecular structure of life.”

That was strange, the structure of life. Of course he was talking down to her; things are not briefly described, her father had said, when one is talking of life. So he was good at finding out the molecular structure of life, this fellow whose wordless cry she had heard faintly from congested lungs, from the dark neighborhood and approaches of his death; he had called out and “Poor child,” her mother had whispered, but it was she who had answered, had followed him. And now he brought her back to life.

“Ah,” she said, still not lifting her head, “I don’t understand all that. I’m stupid.”

“Why did they name you Bruna, when you’re blonde?”

She looked up startled, laughed. “I was bald till I was ten months old.” She looked at him, seeing him again, and the future be damned, since all possible futures ever envisaged are—rusty sinks, two-week vacations and bombs or collective fraternity or harps and hours—endlessly, sordidly dreary, all delight being in the present and its past, all truth too, and all fidelity in the word, the flesh, the present moment: for the future, however you look at it, contains only one sure thing and that is death. But the moment is unpredictable. There is simply no telling what will happen. Kasimir came in with a bunch of red and blue flowers and said, “Mother wants to know if you’d like milk-toast for supper.”

“Oatbread, oatbread,” Bruna sang arranging the cornflowers and poppies in Stefan’s water-glass. They ate oats three times a day here, some poultry, turnips, potatoes; the little brother Antony raised lettuce, the mother cooked, the daughters swept the big house; there was no wheat-flour, no beef, no milk, no housemaid, not any more, not since before Bruna was born. They camped here in their big old country house, they lived like gypsies, said the mother: a professor’s daughter born in the middle class, nurtured and married in the middle class, giving up order, plenty,

and leisure without complaint but not giving up the least scruple of the discriminations she had been privileged to learn. So Kasimir for all his gentleness could still hold himself untouched. So Bruna still thought of herself as coming next after Kasimir, and asked about one's family. So Stefan knew himself here in a fortress, in a family, at home. He and Kasimir and Bruna were laughing aloud together when the father came in. "Out," Dr. Augeskar said, standing heroic and absolute in the doorway, the sun-king or a solar myth; his son and daughter, laughing and signaling child-like to Stefan behind his back, went out. "Enough is enough," Augeskar said, ausculting, and Stefan lay guilty, smiling, child-like.

The seventh day, when Stefan and Kasimir should have taken bus and train back to Krasnoy where the University was now open, was hot. Warm darkness followed, windows open, the whole house open to choruses of frogs by the river, choruses of crickets in the furrows, a southwest wind bearing odors of the forest over dry autumn hills. Between the curtains billowing and going slack burned six stars, so bright in the dry dark sky that they might set fire to the curtains. Bruna sat on the floor by Stefan's bed, Kasimir lay like a huge wheatstalk across the foot of it, Bendika, whose husband was in Krasnoy, nursed her five-month-old firstborn in a chair by the empty fireplace. Joachim Bret sat on the windowsill, his shirtsleeves rolled up so that the bluish figures 0A46992 were visible on his lean arm, playing his guitar to accompany an English lute-song:

*Yet be just and constant still,
Love may beget a wonder,
Not unlike a summer's frost or
winter's fatal thunder:
He that holds his sweetheart dear
until his day of dying
Lives of all that ever lived
most worthy the envying.*

Then, since he liked to sing praise and blame of love in all the languages he knew and did not know, he began to strum out “Plaisir d’Amour,” but came to grief on the shift of key, while the baby was sat up to belch loudly causing merriment. The baby was flung aloft by Kasimir while Bendika protested softly, “He’s full, Kasi, he’ll spill.”—“I am your uncle. I am Uncle Kasimir, my pockets are full of peppermints and papal indulgences. Look at me, whelp! You don’t dare vomit on your uncle. You don’t dare. Go vomit on your aunt.” The baby stared unwinking at Bruna and waved its hands; its fat, silky belly showed between shirt and diaper. The girl returned its gaze as silently, as steadily. “Who are you?” said the baby. “Who are you?” said the maiden, without words, in wonder, while Stefan watched and faint chords in A sobbed joyously on Bret’s guitar between the lighted room and the dark dry night of autumn. The tall young mother carried the baby off to bed, Kasimir turned off the light. Now the autumn night was in the room, and their voices spoke among the choruses of crickets and frogs on the fields, by the streams. “It was clever of you to get sick, Stefan,” said Kasimir, lying again across the foot of the bed, long arms white in the dusk. “Stay sick, and we can stay here all winter.”

“All year. For years. Did you get your fiddle fixed?”

“Oh yes. Been practicing the Schubert. Pa, pa, poum *pah*.”

“When’s the concert?”

“Sometime in October. Plenty of time. Poum, poum—swim, swim, little trout. Ah!” The long white arms sawed vaguely a viol of dusk. “Why did you choose the bass viol, Kasimir?” asked Bret’s voice among frogs and crickets, across marshbottoms and furrows, from the window-sill. “Because he’s shy,” said Bruna’s voice like a country wind. “Because he’s an enemy of the feasible,” said Stefan’s dark dry voice. Silence. “Because I showed extraordinary promise as a student of the cello,” said Kasimir’s voice, “and so I was forced to consider, did I want to perform the Dvorak Concerto to cheering audiences and win a People’s Artist

award, or did I not? I chose to be a low buzz in the background. Poum, pa poum. And when I die, I want you to put my corpse in the fiddle case, and ship it rapid express deep-freeze to Pablo Casals with a label saying ‘Corpse of Great Central European Cellist.’” The hot wind blew through the dark. Kasimir was done, Bruna and Stefan were ready to pass on, but Joachim Bret was not able to. He spoke of a man who had been helping people get across the border; here in the southwest rumors of him were thick now; a young man, Bret said, who had been jailed, had escaped, got to England, and come back; set up an escape route, got over a hundred people out in ten months, and only now had been spotted and was being hunted by the secret police. “Quixotic? Traitorous? Heroic?” Bret asked. “He’s hiding in the attic now,” Kasimir said, and Stefan added, “Sick of milk-toast.” They evaded and would not judge; betrayal and fidelity were immediate to them, could not be weighed any more than a pound of flesh, their own flesh. Only Bret, who had been born outside prison, was excited, insistent. Prevene was crawling with agents, he went, even if you went to buy a newspaper your identification was checked. “Easier to have it tattooed on, like you,” said Kasimir. “Move your foot, Stefan.”—“Move your fat rump, then.”—“Oh, mine are German numbers, out of date. A few more wars and I’ll run out of skin.”—“Shed it, then, like a snake.”—“No, they go right down to the bone.”—“Shed your bones, then,” Stefan said, “be a jelly-fish. Be an amoeba. When they pin me down, I bud off. Two little spineless Stefans where they thought they had one MR 64100282A. Four of them, eight, sixteen thirty-two sixty-four a hundred and twenty-eight. I would entirely cover the surface of the globe were it not for my natural enemies.” The bed shook, Bruna laughed in darkness. “Play the English song again, Joachim,” she said.

*Yet be just and constant still,
Love may beget a wonder . . .*

"Stefan," she said in the afternoon light of the fourteenth day as she sat, and he lay with his head on her lap, on a green bank above the river-marshes south of the house. He opened his eyes: "Must we go?"

"No."

He closed his eyes again, saying, "Bruna." He sat up and sat beside her, staring at her. "Bruna, oh God! I wish you weren't a virgin." She laughed and watched him, wary, curious, defenseless. "If only—here, now—I've got to go away day after tomorrow!"—"But not right under the kitchen windows," she said tenderly. The house stood thirty yards from them. He collapsed by her burying his head in the angle of her arm, against her side, his lips on the very soft skin of her forearm. She stroked his hair and the nape of his neck.

"Can we get married? Do you want to get married?"

"Yes, I want to marry you, Stefan."

He lay still awhile longer, then sat up again, slowly this time, and looked across the reeds and choked, sunlit river to the hills and the mountains behind them.

"I'll have my degree next year."

"I'll have my teaching certificate in a year and a half."

They were silent awhile.

"I could quit school and work. We'll have to apply for a place . . ." The walls of the one rented room facing a courtyard strung with sooty washing rose up around them, indestructible. "All right," he said. "Only I hate to waste this." He looked from the sunlit water up to the mountains. The warm wind of evening blew past them. "All right. But Bruna, do you understand . . ." that all this is new to me, that I have never waked before at dawn in a high-windowed room and lain hearing the perfect silence, never walked out over fields in a bright October morning, never sat down at table with fair, laughing brothers and sisters, never spoken in early evening by a river with a girl who loved me, that I have known that order, peace, and tenderness must exist but never hoped even to

witness them, let alone possess them? And day after tomorrow I must go back. No, she did not understand. She was only the country silence and the blessed dark, the bright stream, the wind, the hills, the cool house; all that was hers and her; she could not understand. But she took him in, the stranger in the rainy night, who would destroy her. She sat beside him and said softly, "I think it's worth it, Stefan, it's worthwhile."

"It is. We'll borrow. We'll beg, we'll steal, we'll filch. I'll be a great scientist, you know. I'll create life in a test-tube. After a squalid early career Fabbre rose to sudden prominence. We'll go to meetings in Vienna. In Paris. The hell with life in a test-tube! I'll do better than that, I'll get you pregnant within five minutes, oh you beauty, laugh, do you? I'll show you, you filly, you little trout, oh you darling—" There under the windows of the house and under the mountains still in sunlight, while the boys shouted playing tennis up beside the house, she lay soft, fair, heavy in his arms under his weight, absolutely pure, flesh and spirit one pure will: to let him come in, let him come in.

Not now, not here. His will was mixed, and obdurate. He rolled away and lay face up in the grass, a black flicker in his eyes looking at the sky. She sat with her hand on his hand. Peace had never left her. When he sat up she looked at him as she had looked at Bendika's baby, steadily, with pondering recognition. She had no praise for him, no reservation, no judgment. Here he is; this is he.

"It'll be meager, Bruna. Meager and unprofitable."

"I expect so," she said, watching him.

He stood up and brushed grass off his trousers. "I love Bruna!" he shouted, lifting his hand; and from the sunlit slopes across the river-marshes where dusk was rising came a vague short sound, not her name, not his voice. "You see?" he said standing over her, smiling. "Echoes, even. Get up, the sun's going, do you want me to get pneumonia again?" She reached out her hand, he took it and pulled her up to him. "I'll be very loyal, Bruna," he said. He was a small man and when they stood together she