



Philip Roth

The Prague
Orgy

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...from Zuckerman's notebooks

New York, Jan. 11, 1976

Your novel," he says, "is absolutely one of the five or six books of my life."

"You must assure Mr. Sisovsky," I say to his companion, "that he has flattered me enough."

"You have flattered him enough," she tells him. A woman of about forty, pale eyes, broad cheekbones, dark, severely parted hair—a distraught, arresting face. One blue vein bulges dangerously in her temple as she perches at the edge of my sofa, quite still. In black like Prince Hamlet. Signs of serious wear at the seat of the black velvet skirt

of her funereal suit. Her fragrance is strong, her stockings laddered, her nerves shot.

He is younger, perhaps by ten years: thick-bodied, small, sturdy, with a broad, small-nosed face that has the ominous potency of a gloved fist. I see him lowering the brow and breaking doors down with it. Yet the longish hair is the hair of the heartthrob, heavy, silky hair of an almost Oriental darkness and sheen. He wears a gray suit, a faintly luminous fabric, the jacket tailored high under the arms and pinching a little at the shoulders. The trousers cling to a disproportionately powerful lower torso—a soccer player in long pants. His pointed white shoes are in need of repair; his white shirt is worn with the top buttons open. Something of the wastrel, something of the mobster, something too of the overprivileged boy. Where the woman's English is heavily accented, Sisovsky's is only mildly flawed, and articulated so confidently—with oddly elegant Oxonian vowels—that the occasional syntactical contusion strikes me as a form of cunning, an ironical game to remind his American host that he is, after all, only a refugee, little more than a newcomer to the tongue mastered already with so much fluency and charm. Beneath all this deference to me, I take him to be one of the strong ones, one of the stallions who has the strength of his outrage.

"Tell him to tell me about *his* book," I say to her. "What was it called?"

But on he continues about mine. "When we arrived in

Canada from Rome, yours was the first book that I bought. I have learned that it had a scandalous response here in America. When you were so kind to agree to see me, I went to the library to find out how Americans have perceived your work. The question interests me because of how Czechs perceived my own work, which also had a scandalous response."

"What was the scandal?"

"Please," he says, "I don't wish to compare our two books. Yours is a work of genius, and mine is nothing. When I studied Kafka, the fate of his books in the hands of the Kafkologists seemed to me to be more grotesque than the fate of Josef K. I feel this is true also with you. This scandalous response gives another grotesque dimension, and belongs now to your book as Kafkologine stupidities belong to Kafka. Even as the banning of my own little book creates a dimension not at all intended by me."

"Why was it banned, your book?"

"The weight of the stupidity you must carry is heavier than the weight of banning."

"Not true."

"I am afraid it is, *cher maître*. You come to belittle the meaning of your vocation. You come to believe that there is no literary culture that matters. There is a definite existential weakening of your position. This is regrettable because, in fact, you have written a masterpiece."

Yet he never says what it is about my book that he likes.

Maybe he doesn't really like it. Maybe he hasn't read it. Much subtlety in such persistence. The ruined exile will not be deflected from commiserating with the American success.

What's he want?

"But it's you," I remind him, "who's been denied the right to practice his profession. Whatever the scandal, I have been profusely—bizarrely—rewarded. Everything from an Upper East Side address to helping worthy murderers get out on parole. That's the power a scandal bestows over here. It's *you* who's been punished in the harshest way. Banning your book, prohibiting your publication, driving you from your country—what could be more burdensome and stupid than that? I'm glad you think well of my work, but don't be polite about *cher maître's* situation, *mon cher ami*. What made what you wrote such a scandal?"

The woman says, "Zdenek, tell him."

"What is there to tell?" he says. "A satirical smile is harder for them than outright ideological fanaticism. I laughed. They are ideologues. I hate ideologues. That is what causes so much offense. It also causes my doubt."

I ask him to explain the doubt.

"I published one harmless little satire in Prague in 1967. The Russians came to visit in 1968 and I have not published anything since. There is nothing more to say. What interests me are these foolish reviews that I read in the library of your book. Not that they are foolish, that goes without saying. It is that there is not one which could be

called intelligent. One reads such things in America and one is struck with terror for the future, for the world, for everything."

"Terror for the future, even for the world, I understand. But for 'everything'? Sympathize with a writer about his foolish reviews and you have a friend for life, *Sisovsky*, but now that this has been achieved, I'd like to hear about your doubt."

"Tell him about your *doubt*, *Zdenek*!"

"How can I? I don't even believe in my doubt, frankly. I don't think I have any doubt at all. But I think I should."

"Why?" I say.

"I remember the time before the invasion of Prague," he says. "I swear to you that every single review of your work could not have been published in Prague in the sixties—the level is too low. And this in spite of the fact that according to simplified notions we were a Stalinate country and the U.S.A. was the country of intellectual freedom."

"Zdenek, he wants to hear not about these reviews—he wishes to hear about your doubt!"

"Calm down," he tells her.

"The man is asking a question."

"I am answering it."

"Then do it. *Do it*. He has told you already that you have flattered him enough!" Italy, Canada, now New York—she is as sick of him as of their wandering. While he speaks her eyes momentarily close and she touches the distended vein in her temple—as though remembering yet

another irreversible loss. Sisovsky drinks my whiskey, she refuses even a cup of tea. She wants to go, probably all the way back to Czechoslovakia, and probably on her own.

I intervene—before she can scream—and ask him, “Could you have stayed on in Czechoslovakia, despite the banning of your book?”

“Yes. But if I had stayed in Czechoslovakia, I am afraid I would have taken the way of resignation. I could not write, speak in public, I could not even see my friends without being taken in for interrogation. To try to do something, anything, is to endanger one’s own well-being, and the well-being of one’s wife and children and parents. I have a wife there. I have a child and I have an aging mother who has already been deprived of enough. You choose resignation because you realize that there is nothing to be done. There is no resistance against the Russification of my country. The fact that the occupation is hated by everyone isn’t any defense in the long run. You Americans think in terms of one year or two; Russians think in centuries. They know instinctively that they live in a long time, and that the time is theirs. They know it deeply, and they are right. The truth is that as time goes by, the population slowly accepts its fate. Eight years have passed. Only writers and intellectuals continue to be persecuted, only writing and thinking are suppressed; everybody else is content, content even with their hatred of the Russians, and mostly they live better than they ever have. Modesty alone demands that we leave them be. You can’t

keep clamoring about being published without wondering if it is only your vanity speaking. I am not a great genius like you. People have Musil and Proust and Mann and Nathan Zuckerman to read, why should they read me? My book was a scandal not only because of my satirical smile but because in 1967 when I was published I was twenty-five. The new generation. The future. But my generation of the future has made better peace with the Russians than anyone. For me to stay in Czechoslovakia and make trouble with the Russians about my little books—why? Why is another book from me important?”

“That isn’t Solzhenitsyn’s point of view.”

“Good for him. Why should I pay everything to try to publish another book with a satirical smile? What am I proving by fighting against them and endangering myself and everyone I know? Unfortunately, however, as much as I mistrust the way of reckless vanity, I suspect even more the way of resignation. Not for others—they do as they must—but for myself. I am not a courageous person, but I cannot be out-and-out cowardly.”

“Or is that also just vanity?”

“Exactly—I am *totally* in doubt. In Czechoslovakia, if I stay there, yes, I can find some kind of work and at least live in my own country and derive some strength from that. There I can at least be a Czech—but I cannot be a writer. While in the West, I can be a writer, but not a Czech. Here, where as a writer I am totally negligible, I am *only* a writer. As I no longer have all the other things

that gave meaning to life—my country, my language, friends, family, memories, et cetera—here for me making literature is everything. But the only literature I can make is so much about life there that only there can it have the effect I desire.”

“So, what’s even heavier than the weight of the banning is this doubt that it foments.”

“In me. Only in me. Eva has no doubt. She has only hatred.”

Eva is astonished. “Hatred for what?”

“For everyone who has betrayed you,” he says to her. “For everyone who deserted you. You hate them and wish they were dead.”

“I don’t even think of them anymore.”

“You wish them to be tortured in Hell.”

“I have forgotten them completely.”

“I should like to tell you about Eva Kalinova,” he says to me. “It is too vulgar to announce such a thing, but it is too ridiculous for you not to know. It is personally humiliating that I should ask you to endure the great drama of my doubt while Eva sits here like no one.”

“I am happy to be sitting like no one,” she says. “This is not necessary.”

“Eva,” he says, “is Prague’s great Chekhovian actress. Go to Prague and ask. No one there will dispute it, not even the regime. There is no Nina since hers, no Irina, no Masha.”

“I don’t want this,” she says.

“When Eva gets on the streetcar in Prague, people still applaud. All of Prague has been in love with her since she was eighteen.”

“Is that why they write on my wall ‘the Jew’s whore’? Because they are in love with me? Don’t be stupid. That is over.”

“Soon she will be acting again,” he assures me.

“To be an actress in America, you must speak English that does not give people a headache!”

“Eva, sit down.”

But her career is finished. She cannot sit.

“You cannot be on the stage and speak English that nobody can understand! Nobody will hire you to do that. I do not want to perform in more plays—I have had enough of being an artificial person. I am tired of imitating all the touching Irinas and Ninas and Mashas and Sashas. It confuses me and it confuses everyone else. We are people who fantasize too much to begin with. We read too much, we feel too much, we fantasize too much—we want all the wrong things! I am *glad* to be finished with all my successes. The success comes to the person anyway, not to the acting. What good does it do? What does it serve? Only egomania. Brezhnev has given me a chance to be an ordinary nobody who performs a real job. I sell dresses—and dresses are needed more by people than stupid touching Chekhovian actresses!”

“But what,” I ask, “do Chekhovian actresses need?”

“To be in the life of others the way they are in a play,

and not in a play the way they are supposed to be in the life of others! They need to be rid of their selfishness and their feelings and their looks and their art!" Beginning to cry, she says, "At last I am rid of mine!"

"Eva, tell him about your Jewish demons. He is the American authority on Jewish demons. She is pursued, Mr. Zuckerman, by Jewish demons. Eva, you must tell him about the Vice-Minister of Culture and what happened with him after you left your husband. Eva was married to somebody that in America you have never heard of, but in Czechoslovakia the whole country loves him. He is a very beloved theatrical personality. You can watch him on television every week. He has all the old mothers crying when he sings Moravian folk songs. When he talks to them with that dreadful voice, the girls are all swooning. You hear him on the jukeboxes, you hear him on the radio, wherever you go you hear this dreadful voice that is supposed to be a hot-blooded gypsy. If you are that man's wife you don't have to worry. You can play all the great heroines at the National Theater. You can have plenty of room to live. You can take all the trips you want abroad. If you are that man's wife, they leave you alone."

"He leaves you alone too," she says. "Zdenek, why do you persecute me? I do not care to be an ironical Czech character in an ironical Czech story. Everything that happens in Czechoslovakia, they shrug their shoulders and say, 'Pure Schweik, pure Kafka.' I am sick of them both."

"Tell me about your Jewish demons," I say.

"I don't have them," she replies, looking furiously at Sisovsky.

"Eva fell in love with a Mr. Polak and left her husband for him. Now, if you are Mr. Polak's mistress," Sisovsky says, "they do not leave you alone. Mr. Polak has had many mistresses and they have never left any of them alone. Eva Kalinova is married to a Czechoslovak Artist of Merit, but she leaves him to take up with a Zionist agent and bourgeois enemy of the people. And this is why they write 'the Jew's whore' on the wall outside the theater, and send poems to her in the mail about her immorality, and drawings of Polak with a big Jewish nose. This is why they write letters to the Minister of Culture denouncing her and demanding that she be removed from the stage. This is why she is called in to see the Vice-Minister of Culture. Leaving a great Artist of Merit and a boring, sentimental egomaniac like Petr Kalina for a Jew and a parasite like Pavel Polak, she is no better than a Jew herself."

"Please," says Eva, "stop telling this story. All these people, they suffer for their ideas and for their banned books, and for democracy to return to Czechoslovakia—they suffer for their principles, for their humanity, for their hatred of the Russians, and in this terrible story I am still suffering for love!"

"'Do you know,' he says to her, our enlightened Vice-Minister of Culture, 'do you know, Madam Kalinova,'" Sisovsky continues, "'that half our countrymen believe you

really are a Jewess, by blood?' Eva says to him, very dryly—for Eva can be a very dry, very beautiful, very intelligent woman when she is not angry with people or frightened out of her wits—very dryly she says, 'My dear Mr. Vice-Minister, my family was being persecuted as Protestants in Bohemia in the sixteenth century.' But this does not stop him—he knows this already. He says to her, 'Tell me—why did you play the role of the Jewess Anne Frank on the stage when you were only nineteen years old?' Eva answers, 'I played the role because I was chosen from ten young actresses. And all of them wanted it more than the world.' 'Young actresses,' he asks her, 'or young Jewesses?'

"I beg you, Zdenek, I cannot hear my ridiculous story! I cannot hear *your* ridiculous story! I am sick and tired of hearing our story, I am sick and tired of *having* our story! That was Europe, this is America! I shudder to think I was ever that woman!"

"'Young actresses,' he asks her, 'or young Jewesses?' Eva says, 'What difference does that make? Some were Jewish, I suppose. But I am not.' 'Well then,' he says to Eva, 'why did you want to continue playing this Jewess on the stage for two years, if you weren't, at the least, a Zionist sympathizer even then?' Eva replies, 'I have played a Jewess in *Ivanov* by Anton Chekhov. I have played a Jewess in *The Merchant of Venice* by Shakespeare.' This convinces him of nothing. That Eva had wanted to play a Jewess even in a play by Anton Chekhov, where you

have to look for one high and low, does not, in the opinion of the vice-minister, strengthen her position. 'But everybody understands,' Eva explains to him, '. . . these are only *roles*. If half the country thinks I'm a Jew, that does not make it so. They once said I was part gypsy too; probably there are as many people who still believe that because of the ridiculous film I made with Petr. But, Mr. Vice-Minister,' Eva says, 'what everybody knows, what is true and indisputable, is that I am none of these things: *I am an actress*.' He corrects her. 'An actress, Madam Kalinova, who likes to portray Jewesses, who portrays them masterfully—*that* is what everyone knows. What everyone knows is that no one in all of our country can portray a Jewess better.' 'And if that is even true? Is that also a crime in this country now?' By then Eva is shouting and, of course, she is crying. She is shaking all over. And this makes him nice to her suddenly, certainly nicer than before. He offers brandy to calm her down. He explains that he is not talking about what is the law. He is not even speaking for himself. His heart happens to have been greatly moved in 1956 when he saw Eva playing little Anne Frank. He wept at her performance—he has never forgotten it. His confession causes Eva to become completely crazy. 'Then what are you talking about?' she asks him. 'The feelings of the people,' he replies. 'The sentiments of the great Czech people. To desert Petr Kalina, an Artist of Merit, to become the mistress of the Zionist Polak would have been damaging enough, but to

the people it is unforgivable because of your long history of always playing Jewesses on the stage.' 'This makes no sense,' Eva tells him. 'It cannot be. The Czech people loved Anne Frank, they loved *me* for portraying her!' Here he removes from his file all these fake letters by all the offended members of the theatergoing public—fake, just like the writing on the theater walls. This closes the case. Eva is dismissed from the National Theater. The vice-minister is so pleased with himself that he goes around boasting how he handled Polak's whore and made that arrogant Jew bastard know just who is running this country. He believes that when the news reaches Moscow, the Russians will give him a medal for his cruelty and his anti-Semitism. They have a gold medal just for this. But instead he loses his job. The last I heard he was assistant editor of the publishing house of religious literature. Because the Czechs *did* love Anne Frank—and because somebody high up wants to be rid of the stupid vice-minister anyway—he is fired for how he has handled Eva Kalinova. Of course for Eva it would have been better if instead of firing the vice-minister they would restore her position as leading actress with the National Theater. But our system of justice is not yet so developed. It is stronger on punishment than on restitution."

"They are strong on *nothing*," says Eva. "It is that I am so weak. That I am stupid and cannot defend myself against all of these bullies! I cry, I shake, I cave in. I *deserve* what they do. In this world, still to carry on about

a man! They should have cut my head off. *That* would have been justice!"

"And now," says Sisovsky, "she is with another Jew. At her age. Now Eva is ruined completely."

She erupts in Czech, he replies in English. "On Sunday," he says to her, "what will you do at home? Have a drink, Eviczka. Have some whiskey. Try to enjoy life."

Again, in Czech, she pleads with him, or berates him, or berates herself. In English, and again most gently, he says, "I understand. But *Zuckerman* is interested."

"I am going!" she tells me—"I must go!" and rushes from the living room.

"Well, I stay . . ." he mutters and empties his glass. Before I can get up to show her out, the door to my apartment is opened and slammed shut.

"Since you are curious," says Sisovsky, while I pour him another drink, "she said that she is going home and I said what will you do at home and she said, 'I am sick of your mind and I am sick of my body and I am sick to death of these boring stories!'"

"She wants to hear a new story."

"What she wants is to hear a new man. Today she is angry because she says I bring her here with me only to show her to you. What am I to do—leave her alone in our room to hang herself? On a Sunday? Wherever we go now in New York and there is a man, she accuses me of this. 'What is the function of this man?' she says. There are dramatic scenes where she calls me a pimp. I am the

pimp because she wants to leave me and is afraid to leave me because in New York she is nobody and alone."

"And she can't go back to Prague?"

"It is better for her not to be Eva Kalinova here than not to be Eva Kalinova there. In Prague, Eva would go out of her mind when she saw who they had cast to play Madam Arkadina."

"But here she's out of her mind selling dresses."

"No," he says. "The problem is not dresses. It's Sundays. Sunday is not the best day in the émigré's week."

"Why did they let the two of you go?"

"The latest thing is to let people go, people who want to leave the country. Those who don't want to leave, they must keep silent. And those who don't want to leave, and who don't wish to keep silent, they finish up in jail."

"I didn't realize, Sisovsky, that on top of everything else you were Jewish."

"I resemble my mother, who was not. My father was the Jew. Not only a Jew, but like you, a Jew writing about Jews; like you, Semite-obsessed all his life. He wrote hundreds of stories about Jews, only he did not publish one. My father was an introverted man. He taught mathematics in the high school in our provincial town. The writing was for himself. Do you know Yiddish?"

"I am a Jew whose language is English."

"My father's stories were in Yiddish. To read the stories, I taught myself Yiddish. I cannot speak. I never had him to speak it to. He died in 1941. Before the Jews began

even to be deported, a Nazi came to our house and shot him."

"Why him?"

"Since Eva is no longer here, I can tell you. It's another of my boring European stories. One of her favorites. In our town there was a Gestapo officer who loved to play chess. After the occupation began, he found out that my father was the chess master of the region, and so he had him to his house every night. My father was horribly shy of people, even of his students. But because he believed that my mother and my brother would be protected if he was courteous with the officer, he went whenever he was called. And they *were* protected. All the Jews in the town were huddled into the Jewish quarter. For the others things got a little worse every day, but not for my family. For more than a year nobody bothered them. My father could no longer teach at the high school, but he was now allowed to go around as a private tutor to earn some money. At night, after our dinner, he would leave the Jewish quarter and go to play chess with the Gestapo officer. Well, stationed in the town there was another Gestapo officer. He had a Jewish dentist whom *he* was protecting. The dentist was fixing all his teeth for him. His family too was left alone, and the dentist was allowed to continue with his practice. One Sunday, a Sunday probably much like today, the two Gestapo officers went out drinking together and they got drunk, much the way, thanks to your hospitality, we are getting nicely drunk

here. They had an argument. They were good friends, so it must have been a terrible argument, because the one who played chess with my father was so angry that he walked over to the dentist's house and got the dentist out of bed and shot him. This enraged the other Nazi so much that the next morning he came to our house and he shot my father, and my brother also, who was eight. When he was taken before the German commandant, my father's murderer explained, 'He shot my Jew, so I shot his.' 'But why did you shoot the child?' 'That's how God-damn angry I was, sir.' They were reprimanded and told not to do it again. That was all. But even that reprimand was something. There was no law in those days against shooting Jews in their houses, or even on the street."

"And your mother?"

"My mother hid on a farm. There I was born, two months later. Neither of us looks like my father. Neither did my brother, but his short life was just bad luck. We two survived."

"And why did your father, with an Aryan wife, write stories in Yiddish? Why not in Czech? He must have spoken Czech to the students at the high school."

"Czech was for Czechs to write. He married my mother, but he never thought he was a real Czech. A Jew who marries a Jew is able at home to forget he's a Jew. A Jew who marries an Aryan like my mother has her face there always to remind him."

"He didn't ever write in German?"

"We were not Sudeten Germans, you see, and we were not Prague Jews. Of course German was less foreign to him than Czech, because of Yiddish. German he insisted on for my brother to be properly educated. He himself read Lessing, Herder, Goethe, and Schiller, but his own father had been, not even a town Jew like him, he had been a Jew in the farmlands, a village shopkeeper. To the Czechs such Jews spoke Czech, but in the family they spoke only Yiddish. All of this is in my father's stories: homelessness beyond homelessness. One story is called 'Mother Tongue.' Three pages only, about a little Jewish boy who speaks bookish German, Czech without the native flavor, and the Yiddish of people simpler than himself. Kafka's homelessness, if I may say so, was nothing beside my father's. Kafka had at least the nineteenth century in his blood—all those Prague Jews did. Kafka belonged to literature, if nothing else. My father belonged to nothing. If he had lived, I think that I would have developed a great antagonism to my father. I would have thought, 'What is this man so lonely for? Why is he so sad and withdrawn? He should join the revolution—then he would not sit with his head in his hands, wondering where he belongs.'"

"Sons are famous the world over for generous thoughts about fathers."

"When I came to New York and wrote my letter to you, I said to Eva, 'I am a relative of this great man.' I was thinking of my father and his stories. Since we have

come from Europe, I have already read fifty American novels about Jews. In Prague I knew nothing about this incredible phenomenon and how vast it was. Between the wars in Czechoslovakia my father was a freak. Even had he wished to publish his stories, where would they have appeared? Even if he had published all two hundred of them, no one would have paid attention—not to that subject. But in America my father would have been a celebrated writer. Had he emigrated before I was born, had he come to New York City in his thirties, he would have been discovered by some helpful person and published in the best magazines. He would be something more now than just another murdered Jew. For years I never thought of my father, now every minute I wonder what he would make of the America I am seeing. I wonder what America would have made of him. He would be seventy-two. I am obsessed now with this great Jewish writer that might have been."

"His stories are that good?"

"I am not exaggerating his excellence. He was a deep and wonderful writer."

"Like whom? Sholem Aleichem? Isaac Babel?"

"I can tell you only that he was elliptical, humble, self-conscious, all in his own way. He could be passionate, he could be florid, he could be erudite—he could be anything. No, this is not the Yiddish of Sholem Aleichem. This is the Yiddish of Flaubert. His last work, ten little stories about Nazis and Jews, the saddest commentary I have

ever read about the worst life has to offer. They are about the family of the Nazi commandant he played chess with at night. About his visits to the house and how charmed they all were. He called them 'Stories about Chess.'"

"What became of those stories?"

"They are with my books in Prague. And my books in Prague are with my wife. And my wife does not like me so much anymore. She has become a drunk because of me. Our daughter has become crazy because of me and lives with her aunt because of me. The police will not leave my wife alone because of me. I don't think I'll ever see my father's stories again. My mother goes to ask my wife for her husband's stories and my wife recounts for her all of my infidelities. She shows my mother photographs of all my mistresses, unclothed. These too I unfortunately left behind with my books."

"Will she destroy your father's stories?"

"No, no. She couldn't do it. Olga is a writer too. In Czechoslovakia she is very well known for her writing, for her drinking, and for showing everybody her cunt. You would like Olga. She was once very beautiful, with beautiful long legs and gray cat-eyes and her books were once beautiful too. She is a most compliant woman. It is I alone whom she opposes. Anything another man wants, Olga will do it. She will do it well. If you were to visit Prague, and you were to meet Olga and Olga were to fall in love with you, she would even give you my father's stories, if you were to go about it the right way. She loves

原书缺页

with Bolotka from my hotel through the maze of the ghetto, passing on the way the capsized tombstones of what he informs me is the oldest Jewish cemetery left in Europe. Within the iron grating, the jumble of crooked, eroded markers looks less like a place of eternal rest than something a cyclone has torn apart. Twelve thousand Jews buried in layers in what in New York would be a small parking lot. Drizzle dampening the tombstones, ravens in the trees.

Klenek's: large older women in dark rayon raincoats, young pretty women with jewels and long dresses, stout middle-aged men dressed in boxy suits and looking like postal clerks, elderly men with white hair, a few slight young men in American jeans—but no fifteen-year-old girls. Bolotka may be having some fun exaggerating for his visitor the depths of Prague depravity—a little cold water on free-world fantasies of virtuous political suffering.

Beside me on a sofa, Bolotka explains who is who and who likes what.

"That one was a journalist till they fired him. He loves pornography. I saw him with my eyes fucking a girl from behind and reading a dirty book at the same time. That one, he is a terrible abstract painter. The best abstract painting he did was the day the Russians came. He went out and painted over all the street signs so the tanks wouldn't know where they were. He has the longest prick in Prague. That one, the little clerk, that is Mr. Vodicka.

He is a very good writer, an excellent writer, but everything scares him. If he sees a petition, he passes out. When you bring him to life again, he says he will sign it: he has ninety-eight percent reason to sign, and only two percent reason not to sign, and he has only to think about the two percent and he will sign. By the next day the two percent has grown to one hundred percent. Just this week Mr. Vodicka told the government that if he made bad politics he is sorry. He is hoping this way they will let him write again about his perversion."

"Will they?"

"Of course not. They will tell him now to write a historical novel about Pilsen beer."

We are joined by a tall, slender woman, distinguished by a mass of hair dyed the color of a new penny and twisted down over her forehead in curls. Heavy white makeup encases her sharp, birdlike face. Her eyes are gray cat-eyes, her smile is beckoning. "I know who you are," she whispers to me.

"And you are who?"

"I don't know. I don't even feel I exist." To Bolotka: "Do I exist?"

"This one is Olga," Bolotka says. "She has the best legs in Prague. She is showing them to you. Otherwise she does not exist."

Mr. Vodicka approaches Olga, bows like a courtier, and takes her hand. He is a little, unobtrusive man of sixty,

neatly dressed and wearing heavy spectacles. Olga pays him no attention.

"My lover wants to kill me," she says to me.

Mr. Vodicka is whispering in her ear. She waves him away, but passionately he presses her hand to his cheek.

"He wants to know if she has any boys for him," Bolotka explains.

"Who is she?"

"She was the most famous woman in the country. Olga wrote our love stories. A man stood her up in a restaurant and she wrote a love story, and the whole country talked about why he stood her up. She had an abortion and she told the doctor it could be one of eleven men, and the whole country debated whether it could actually be so many. She went to bed with a woman and the whole country read the story and was guessing who it was. She was seventeen, she already wrote a bestseller, *Touha*. Longing. Our Olga loves most the absent thing. She loves the Bohemian countryside. She loves her childhood. But always something is missing. Olga suffers the madness that follows after loss. And this even *before* the Russians. Klenek saw her in a café, a tall country girl, her heart full of *touha*, and he took her here to live with him. This is over twenty years ago. For seven years Olga was married. She had a child. Poor child. Now her husband runs off with the other famous woman in our country, a beautiful Czech actress who he will destroy in America, and Olga, Klenek looks after."

"Why does she need looking after?"

"Why do you need looking after?" Bolotka asks her.

"This is awful," she says. "I hear stories about myself tonight. Stories about who I fuck. I would never fuck such people."

"Why do you need looking after, Olga?" Bolotka asks again.

"Because I'm shaking. Feel me shaking. I never stop shaking. I am frightened of everything." Points to me. "I am frightened of him." She flops down onto the sofa, in the space between Bolotka and me. I feel pressing against mine the best legs in Prague. Also believe I feel the *touha*.

"You don't act frightened," I say.

"Since I am frightened of everything it is as well to go in one direction as the other. If I get into too much trouble, you will come and marry me and take me to America. I will telegram and you will come and save me." She says to Bolotka, "Do you know what Mr. Vodicka wants now? He has a boy who has never seen a woman. He wants me to show it to him. He is going into the street to get him." Then, to me: "Why are you in Prague? Are you looking for Kafka? The intellectuals all come here looking for Kafka. Kafka is dead. They should be looking for Olga. Are you planning to make love to anybody in Prague? If so, you will let me know." To Bolotka: "Kouba. There is Kouba! I cannot be in this house with that Kouba!" To me: "You want to know why I need looking after? *Because of stupid communists like Kouba!*" She points to a