

Translated from the French  
by Linda Coverdale

Norman Manea



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C O M P U L S O R Y  
H A P P I N E S S

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tranquillity they so longed for guarantees complete recovery, believe me. Really new people for a new time. Honesty, order, order and cleansing. New times.

His face truly glows with tranquillity. No longer rigid with tension, his features have somehow acquired more clarity and resolution. His countenance, radiant with faith in the future, fills the entire screen.

Yes, a deep tranquillity indeed. Tranquillity is boiling away, its red vapor clouding the screen, which quivers under the intense light of the fire. Impossible to see anything anymore.

But here's a whole new morning coming up, ignorant of what may happen, peeping through the huge windows of the calendar. Tick-tock, singsongs the toad on the bedside table.

"That light again, a different window. Another blind must be broken . . ."

The blind . . . the blind . . . the word whispered over and over, the voice drowsy, slurred with sleep.

A childish murmur. The click that starts the great wheel of day rolling once again.

T H E T R E N C H C O A T

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"FROM NOW ON, YOU DON'T GIVE YOUR REPORT IN AN office. They've got a new system, they've found something more original," Alexandru I. Stoian was to explain a few weeks later to his friend, the Guileless One.

"In people's apartments? Private conversations with informers? What's that supposed to mean? The interview's more relaxed?" A guileless question from the Guileless One's wife.

Confusion . . . The confused voice of a confused time, a jumble of voices, the murmur of time. The panting, the choking, the sputtering called time.

"With the permission of the tenants, obviously. Con-

fidential agents, or forced to act as such. Two sets of keys and meetings set up in advance." Further details, in the concise style of the code, would come from Al. I. Stoian, known as Ali.

Voices of the times, the modern chorus, the cacophony of the present to which the Narrator listens, attentive to the timbre of this muffled rumble.

"Well, it's possible that they use these apartments even without the permission of the tenants, when nobody's home. It's possible, but I don't think so," Ali would add doubtfully, evasively, cautiously, in the style of the times.

But all this was still in the realm of the future. The future: conjugation of uncertainty?

The future: small and immediate. Already present, already past, already small, shrunken . . . enormous.

For the moment, the present means this rainy Sunday evening. A dark, dense deluge. The city has collapsed underground, dozens, hundreds of meters underground. A spectral subterranean site buried beneath the watery night.

The Stoians' car moves slowly and painfully through the flooded, shadowy streets.

"We wound up having no choice. You kept inventing excuses, but here you are, finally," complains Ioana provokingly.

The couple in the back seat are quiet; Ioana keeps at it.

"Sorry, but personally, I'm glad. Other people's troubles make me glad? Well, at least we won't be alone. We'll all have to suffer together through the boring conversation and Madame Beldeanu's snootiness."

"Yes, but there are compensations," remarks the husband from behind the wheel. "The dinner, the music. Don't skip over the positive side. Don't forget the positive side, comrade teacher; it's important for educators, dear comrade."

"Have you noticed how dinner parties have been disappearing over the last few years?" Ioana starts to blabber, like her husband. "A Latin people like ours, so addicted to conversation and celebrations? Exhaustion, depression . . . not even enough energy left to improvise a potluck supper. Then there are the long distances, and the buses that never run on time . . . But it's the desire, above all, it's the desire to get together that has disappeared. Everyone stuck at home, no one going anywhere. So we ought to be grateful to our precious hosts. A rare chance to get out and see people. An adventure, that's what it is."

"Me . . . well, I would've accepted their invitation a long time ago," the soft voice of Felicia observes, floating up from the back seat. "After all, they've been trying for years. A courtesy visit, basically, and *basta*. So they don't think we've got anything against them. The problem was that . . ."

"The problem was that the Kid didn't want to. The Kid can't stand Lady Di, I know, he's told us all often enough. He can't stand her, and he avoids that husband of hers. A purely preventive measure, I know. A sanitary precaution, yes, I've heard the whole rigmarole. We also feel no undying love for the Beldeanus. But Ali couldn't very well refuse Bazil. Not when he's a colleague on the editorial staff, it's just not done."

The gears grind, the headlights poke their stubby beams out into the drenched black streets. Advancing cautiously across town, a long and difficult journey. A deep-sea dive, one might think, with colonies of organisms bursting into view for a brief instant, sinister monstrosities outlined against an unpredictable fluid vastness. But here, inside the diving bell, it's really cozy. Ioana wears her hair boyishly short, in what's called a typhus cut, which looks rather good on her, while Felicia is in her new black mohair vest, so perfectly chic, Italian, isn't it nice to be cruising along lazily underwater while, all around, nature is putting on a show of vitality and grandeur.

"Bazil's a great guy, I'm telling you," announces Ali enthusiastically from the driver's seat. "Two weeks ago, I went with him to a teaching farm outside Bucharest. The guy in charge was a former buddy of his at the Political Institute. He keeps him in chickens, and that's not all. Every once in a while he needs Bazil to do him a little favor in return, obviously. A journalist, in the capital—you never know . . . He supplies him with chickens, but also with the latest jokes about . . . ah . . . you know who. He telephoned Bazil to let him know that he was sending the car from the farm to pick him up, but Bazil didn't want that. Forget it, he tells his pal, we'll manage on our own, thanks anyway."

"Uh, a journalist, in the capital, who knows," comes an echoing purr from Felicia, just to show she's keeping track.

"Of course, Bazil invites me along on this chicken chase, and I can hardly refuse, naturally. These days we'd be

happy with sparrows, as long as we didn't have to spend the best years of our lives waiting on line for them. So we set out Tuesday morning in Bazil's car. Now, I was wondering what he was up to. There are people today who're ready to kill for a drop of gas. Thirty liters a month! That's not even enough to get to the office, I mean, really . . ."

Embarrassed silence. Could that be an allusion to this evening's gas consumption? Ioana rummages nervously in her purse as though she hadn't heard that last remark. A gaffe, Ali felt it immediately, but there's nothing he can do about it. So he goes on in the same vein.

"We stop in front of the first gas station. Comrade Beldeanu gets out his press card, of course. He starts explaining that he's on an assignment, he needs gas. The attendants couldn't care less. They've heard it all. The only argument they listen to is a big fat tip, and even that doesn't always do the trick. Nothing impresses them anymore, not the press, not the Party, nothing. Talk about blasé, they are blasé to the core, you have to come up with a real stunner to jolt them out of their apathy. Bazil doesn't admit defeat, obviously. He insists and finally asks permission to telephone Comrade Colonel Adam, the chief economic watchdog in that area, everyone knows who he is. Well, you can imagine, they don't wait around for that phone call, naturally—they give him a full tank. Now, that's Bazil all over! Unbeatable! You know how he introduces himself? He's not Comrade Vasile Beldeanu, like before. Bazil. That's all, the American way. The name's been Hispanicized . . . but the style's cutting edge, very U.S.A. Simple and direct. Bazil, journalist. On the way back, what do

you think? He pulls the same thing again. Goes home with a full tank, naturally. Unbeatable! To look at him, you'd think he was nobody in particular. But a real go-getter, I'm telling you. Even that house he has. Right in the middle of Embassy Row! And as for what we'll be eating and drinking tonight . . . Just wait. You're going to forget what kind of a world we live in, you'll see."

"Stop blabbing and pay attention to the road! It's pitch-dark, and with this rain, we'll end up wrapped around a tree," warns Ioana sharply. "It's like wartime, like a blackout. In the streets, the apartments, everywhere you look, darkness . . . The elevators all suddenly go on the fritz, then the running water comes back when everyone has given up on it. The children refuse to ride in elevators, did you know that? No food, no electricity, nothing. Dorin, our son, recited the new children's patriotic oath: 'I'll be tall, healthy, clean and neat, without ever needing a bite to eat . . .'"

Laughter at this seemingly recent joke. Laughter, jokes, signs of the times. All around them, the urgent and festive forces of nature, and here, in the torpedo, a sudden clearing. Ioana's new suit, her long, white gloves, her waspish sting form a contrast with the driver's moderating role, with Felicia's proletarian Mona Lisa smile and her limpid radio announcer's voice.

"That's what they'd really like. Not to be asked for food, money, heating, nothing—nothing," continues the wasp.

*They, meaning them, meaning Him, the audience knows it.*

"Speaking of children, what's happened to the Child, hmm? He hasn't said one word, he must be bored stiff by our chatter."

"Not at all, no, really," stammers a baritone voice in the back seat.

"Not at all, not at all . . . So why don't you say something? Well, poor Basil isn't a gorilla, just your basic pig. But Dina Eisberg . . . that is her name, isn't it?" asks the wasp, swiveling around toward the man in the back seat, who continues to stare with indifference out the black window, rippling with rain. "Eisberg, I'm sure of it. Icicle, that's what Ali calls her, and he's an expert on refrigerators. She freezes everything she touches. Unless it's the other way around? You never know . . . It might very well turn out to be the other way around. Well, what have you got to say about it? You're from the same background, after all, you've known Miss Goldberg for a long time. Or is it Salzberg, Süßberg? Now that I think about it, it must be Süßberg . . ."

Felicia tries to stem the attack.

"Dina thinks very highly of him, if you want to know. When I run into her, which isn't often, the first thing she says, every time, is . . . how smart he was in school. The local genius, more or less."

You'd never guess she was talking about someone right there, yet it would seem that this absent mind is the unique receiver, the only one listening.

"Yeah, sure," mumbles Ioana, without turning around this time, studiously contemplating the dripping windshield. "And why, may I ask, doesn't the Boy want to see

his former friend and classmate again? Watch out, Felicia, there might be something behind all this."

"No, not this time." Felicia laughs childishly. "No, that's not it. We just try to stay away from the new class, that's all."

More embarrassed silence . . . Could that insinuation . . . A blunder, perhaps, who knows . . . But Ioana wastes no time in returning to the attack.

"An after-effect of puberty, why not? Those are the most dangerous love affairs. If they crop up again, later in life. Nuclear explosion, catastrophe, end of the world. You never know . . . What does the Kid think about all this? We'd like the Kid's opinion."

The Kid, the Guileless One, the Learned One . . . prolongs the silence. Finally, the baritone voice announces, "No danger, no problem—I've sampled all life's little temptations in my time. Well, almost all . . ."

"Will you stop squabbling!" Opportune interruption once again from the quiet one's wife. "Don't forget you promised me we wouldn't stay late. I'm taking an early train tomorrow and I have to get up at dawn, I told you. Otherwise, I'd never get back by Tuesday. Monday is all I have off, the boss only gave me Monday. Ioana, you know what it's like having to deal with Comrade Chibrit. I don't want us to hang around forever tonight."

Next come questions about Felicia's mother, who's ill, off in some tiny Danubian village. Comments are made about the plight of the elderly, who are being refused aid by hospitals and ambulances . . . The mingling voices of the evening, the confused muttering, evasions, humor and

indulgence and pretense . . . Ioana's poisonous barbs and Ali's strategy of mollification and Felicia's contemplative distance . . . For you, the observer, the Guileless One . . . The miracle of the instant already past, the deep, inaudible breath of the instant to come, chance and void and question: the uncertainty.

The Stoians' car proceeds quietly, with infinite caution. As it approaches a wealthy neighborhood, some lights can now be seen, imagine that, the avenue grows wider, the streets are more and more elegant, the landscape becomes gracious, what's this now, sentry boxes, before which stand militiamen, chilled to the bone. The roads, lanes, discreet little alleys interweave freely, leading at last to homes and gardens.

The car has barely enough time to brake in front of the armed guard who suddenly heaves into view. Ali lowers the window, the sentry leans down, checks the identity card, listens to the explanations: the Beldeanu family behind the embassy, in the courtyard, all the way in the back, friends, invited for the evening. Yes, he knows the Beldeanus, he knows the lady and gentleman, or rather, Comrade Beldeanu, of course. A snappy salute, yes, they may proceed.

"It's not next to the American embassy or the French embassy, only the Ghanaian embassy. But, all the same, it's not bad, you'll see," says Ali, as though trying to boost his passengers' spirits.

The car turns to the left, past the sentry box, into the courtyard, near the clump of trees, turns to the right, here we are.



"This is it, we're here. This is the house."

A last moment of hesitation. The passengers don't dare leave the vehicle. They're still staring doubtfully at the lustrous black night welling out of the deep sky, the deep and troubled waters of an ocean without moon or stars.

"Okay, everyone out now," orders Ioana. "Tuck your head under your umbrella, huddle in your raincoat, let's go. Quickly, come on, just a few steps and we'll be on dry land."

And yes, in fact, only two, three, four, five strides bring them right to the door. Ali leans firmly, insistently, one, two, three, four, five times on the doorbell.

The heavy door of solid wood springs open. There on the threshold, with open arms, stands Don Bazil.

"I'm so happy you've come! Too bad about the weather . . . Make yourselves at home, put your things there, on the coat tree. It's quite comfy in here, we've got everything we need to help us forget about the rest. Rainy outside, cozy inside. Come in, why don't you, come on in."

Very pleasant, it's true, toasty warm, with big electric radiators everywhere you look. And the house, so spacious, so bright, and the furniture, yes, yes, white furniture and pink furniture, amazing, who would have expected that, these days . . . So much elegance and bad taste and prosperity and such a warm atmosphere, isn't it . . . And here's Dina, emerging from the bedroom, coming down the stairs in an evening gown and matching turban of yellow velvet. Hugs all around, I'm telling you. Only the Kid manages to complicate this joyful reunion. Dina goes to greet him, smiling, opening her arms, but her guest

simply holds out his hand. He's never been able to stand her, has he, that painted scarecrow, whose slightest gesture betrays a certain conventional theatricality—no, he's never been able to bear her. But Lady Di is unflappable, and slowly, ceremoniously, she extends her hand to him. The Kid bows quite low, kisses her hand, then keeps her slender fingers in the hollow of his own small paw, as though to study her manicured nails, before consenting at last to a brief formal embrace.

"Since this is the first time you've come here," says Di, turning to Felicia, "we must show you the house."

And so a tour of the premises gets under way. Vasile's office. Madame's boudoir. ("Just a former pantry, that's all," explains their hostess modestly, opening the door to the pretty little room with its sofa and mirror.) The kitchen, the huge storage cupboard with its gleaming shelves, the gigantic refrigerator. ("These days, when you can't just go to the corner store to buy what you need, you're lost without a fridge and ample storage space, so we're reduced to stashing away food like barbarians in caves.") The living room, the bedrooms, the sumptuous bathroom, pink and white tiles, look at that. Everything clean, shining, spotless, charming.

"What'll you have, whisky or vodka?" asks Bazil, returning to his role of the attentive host. "The two superpowers! So, which will it be? The capitalist imperialists? You bet. We've had a bellyful of Big Brother, we prefer the imperialists. For the moment, just for the moment. Bastards, same as the others, but that's human nature, to crave illusion, novelty. So, whisky?"

The gentlemen acquiesce; their wives hesitate.

"For the ladies we have a liqueur, if they'd rather. Imported from Cuba, marvelously delicious, you bet. Unless you'd prefer some other aperitif?"

Felicia smiles, yes, she'd prefer some vermouth. Ioana declines with a sharp little wave. No, Ioana wants vodka.

"Then I'll allow myself to join you, old militant that I am," announces Comrade Bazil gallantly.

Lady Di makes another entrance, from the kitchen this time, rolling a tea cart in front of her. Tiny hors d'oeuvres, as big as thimbles, on a large silver tray. Minuscule canapés, with sardines, tarama, cheese, ham. She passes in front of everyone, in front of Ioana, in front of Felicia, in front of Ali, in front of Bazil, in front of the Guileless One. Each of them chooses one, no, on second thought, two morsels. They taste, they smile, they're amazed, they're thrilled, they're in ecstasy, the Child nods away along with the others, yum, excellent, mute approval from the Guileless One, who can't take his eyes off the hostess's hands. A mouthful, that's how long the miracle lasts, a mouthful. Short, savory, sinful, a brief but exquisite pleasure. Have another, why don't you, do have another, no one can resist, yum, the cries of delight are convincing, yes indeed, they flow as freely as everyone's mouth is watering, full of appetizers and saliva. All help themselves again, again and again.

Dina returns from the kitchen. Another tea cart, another silver tray. Cunning little pastry shells, fresh from the oven, marvelously warm and tender, filled with cheese, with meat, with spinach, spiced with pepper, cumin, sun-

flower seeds, dill and paprika, yum, warm and tender, they melt in the mouth they've teased and inflamed and tainted with pleasure, no one can resist. Ioana and Felicia and Ali, they all help themselves, again and again, swiftly swallowing these appetizers. Ioana and Ali and Felicia and the Learned One and Bazil, even Dina finally has a cheese tartlet, and one more, so scrumptious. They all have more, Felicia, Ali, Bazil, Ioana, and the Guileless One, who keeps nodding as a sign of approval, yum, marvelous, all these dainties are just marvelous, aren't they, the Kid would like to say, his eyes riveted on his hostess's hands.

Another round of drinks, of course, and even Dina has a vermouth, what a surprise, a convivial atmosphere, isn't it, really relaxed, the usual topics are trotted out for discussion, the dinner-party repertoire. The waiting lines for bread plus milk plus toilet paper plus rubber bands plus plus plus. The loused-up public transportation and the poorly lighted streets and the badly heated apartments and the armed patrols, and the neuroses and the illegal abortions and nationalism and the demolition of the lovely old residential neighborhoods, but also the latest scandal in the papers—that superb, that subversive poem, how did it slip past the censor? "We are a vegetable people," superb, super, surprise, however did it come to be written by that actress, a privileged person, and such a fragile woman, how come it was published, they got permission somehow, you bet, permission and collusion, you bet, collusion all up and down the line, obviously, that's how things work with us, you never know who, what, how, why, everything's on the take and on the sly, a thousand-year-

old tradition, tradition and innovation, hand in hand. And dictatorship and poverty and suspicion and fear and widespread complicity and the cynicism of children, yes, yes, the cynicism of children no taller than your knee. Divided souls, their souls are already split in two in their mothers' wombs, you bet, they learn the code, the lies, the deceit, right there in the womb, obviously. And the West, that West so addicted to consumerism and entertainment, the savage, civilized, naïve, selfish West, not a chance, not a hope in hell, kaput, *das Ende*, they couldn't care less, naturally, they're not going to give up their petty little jobs and their little treacheries, you bet, we're all-alone-all-alone-all-alone, of course, they've got the money and we've got the lies, right, alone with our misfortune, that's how it works, you bet.

And another round of whisky-vodka-vermouth, shall we go in to dinner, the fish course awaits.

A long, plump fish, and a short, plump fish, so there'll be enough for everybody. Delicately browned, just out of the oven, pink-and-white flesh, drizzled in lemon juice, sprinkled with salt and pepper. The glasses clink gaily, a crystalline sound, the real thing, from Bohemia, and crystal-clear wine, the real thing, as golden as honey. And the roast veal, done to a turn, meltingly tender in its thick, spicy, appetizing sauce. The succulent meat, and the hearty, dry red wine, and the salad, so crisp, with fresh, delicate colors, and the heavy silverware, and the even heavier silence. Stomachs as round as cannonballs, stuffed solid, somnolent, and vague, erratic, drowsy thoughts, and

increasingly labored and tired congratulations addressed to the hostess, even though everyone knows that Lady Di employs an elderly German cook on such occasions. Tired congratulations, so tired, aren't they, and the stomach is tired and the mind is dulled, sleepy.

"A break, a break!" shouts Ali. "My kingdom for a break . . ."

And sure enough, the guests move to another room for coffee and cognac and dessert and chatter.

"Shall I put on some music?" suggests the indefatigable Bazil, Marathon Host. "What would you like? Tina Turner, or Michael Jackson? You bet! Or maybe one of those little French girls who sing those old-fashioned chansonettes, real sophisticated and racy. Unless you want some Yoko Ono, the Japanese muse, or Homo Lennon, that old druggie lemon. Or some classical, how about classical? Anne Sophie Mutter, old Kara's last find. Karajan, Kara-adolf, Karanazi, with Fräulein Mutter, yeah, yeah, a special couple, hoo-hoo, ha-ha, you bet. Or maybe you'd like some Israelis, grade A, Zuckerman, Perlman, Barenboim . . . or else those others, hmm, closer to home, from the barbarian East? You know what Oistrakh replied when the Yanks asked him who were the better violinists, the Soviets or the Americans? Know what he said?" inquires the tireless Comrade Vasile Bazil Beldeanu, studying his groggy audience. "Get this, here's what he told them," continues their host, drawing out the suspense, rolling up the sleeves of his spotless white shirt and pouring some port into the Learned One's glass. "Who's better?

Well, he says, doesn't matter which side you pick, they're all our good old Odessa Jews. That's right, ha-ha, he knew the score, you bet."

The whisky, the vodka, the hors d'oeuvres, the fish, the roast, the salads, the white wine and the red wine and the cheeses and the dessert and the cognac and the coffee, yes, yes, there's even coffee, real coffee, not ersatz, and excellent imported cigarettes and baroque music, oh yes, when one's this tired, baroque is the only way to go. Everything's perfect, isn't it, yes, yes, and the perfect bowl of fruit, and the décor and the cuisine and the fancy conversation, everything, everything's perfect, of course. The perfect hosts, you bet, indefatigable, flawless, constantly trying to make the evening seem informal, to create a less sophisticated, more friendly atmosphere. Hard, very hard to do . . . Prosperity doesn't draw people together, it's an irritant. Comfortable house, Pantagruelian meal, relaxed atmosphere, a chance to have a good time, forget one's troubles, fears, regrets, that's all, and yet, there you are, it doesn't work, that's what happens, nothing you can do about it.

Conversation has lapsed, despite the energetic efforts of the hosts—who are experienced at this, well trained, in tiptop shape, wired up.

"And you, Felicia, do you still visit churches and synagogues?" asks Dina, taking the initiative once more. "Do you still think those are the only places where one can find interesting faces? You've stopped painting? Ioana told me that you were still at it, that you hadn't given up. I can imagine what it's like being a drawing teacher in a technical school. But you haven't stopped painting, I'm sure of it.

I'm not asking about the religious aspect of this—it's a question, if I understand correctly, of a purely aesthetic interest."

Poor Dina, unbearable Dina! She does her best to act natural and friendly, but she can't overcome that fatal barrier, that's all, she simply can't, whatever she does always comes out stiff and conventional. That's how she fell into the trap named Vasile, the lure of the rudimentary, wouldn't you say, that sudden relief when someone else takes over all social interaction, everyday contacts, favor for favor, social chitchat, comfort, the whole bit.

Felicia's laconic reply has startled her, since any refusal to go along with that artificial spontaneity she affects throws her rudely off her stride. But nothing in the world would make her show it, and she has already turned toward another guest.

"I've always admired the way you behave so naturally, Ioana. Your soul is an open book, to use the popular expression. Ali is really to be envied. Wives these days have no time to do anything anymore, whereas you, you still manage your teaching and your embroidery, and your canning for the winter. What energy, what patience it must take to instruct these farm boys, these future technicians, in the fine points of English pronunciation! I can imagine what that means, school on top of housework and the child. You're a champion, that's what you are. A heroine, one of our truly impressive modern women."

Little gem-like phrases, intended to be simple, appealing, which, once spoken, sound arch and precious, all because of her inability to communicate, you see, that's why

he succeeded, Vasile, that's why she has stayed resigned, content, who knows, she'll have gotten used to the trap named Vasile, she'll have understood it was a trap, she must have understood, in the end, don't you think, but she got used to it, yes, yes, it's rather comfortable, all this, rather comfortable. She tries to make little jokes with Ali or her husband, and they always misfire laboriously, poor, poor Dina, the unbearable, the useless, the poseur. Only the Learned One escapes her inept attentions, she leaves him to his own devices, asking nothing of him, neither participation nor approbation, nothing at all, she leaves him alone.

The Kid hasn't said a word all evening, although he's seemed extremely attentive, tolerant, approving, he keeps nodding yes and keeps his eyes glued to Dina's thumb. The club-like thumb of the left hand. As though he wanted to convince himself that this thumb is the same one he knew quite a long time ago. Delicate, slender hands, so very slender, with a pale purplish-blue tinge, a faint reddish flush, her circulation, isn't it, she's got poor circulation. Delicate hands, certainly, but the left thumb mars the picture: clubbed, inflamed, it looks as though the tip has been sliced right off. Delicate hands and a delicate profile to the oblong face, with its bluish, Oriental shadows, and a delicate figure, with a slender waist—and that horrible thumb on the left hand. There have been many changes, of course, but this unnerving thumb has remained just as he remembered it. The passage of time hasn't softened this distressing detail one whit.

It's late, very, very late, Felicia's sending desperate sig-

nals to Ioana. The train at dawn, the trip, her mother, the hospital, her boss Chibrit, Ioana had promised they wouldn't stay a long time.

Bazil senses the discomfiture. He knows, you bet, that his guests can say all the nasty things they want on the way home, but still, they'll have to admit that this so long delayed get-together has been a success. A pleasant, luxurious evening with perfect hosts, charming people, unpretentious, attentive, convivial, the guests will agree, these are good, honest folks, they're bound to agree on that.

He takes a last mouthful of cognac, savoring it at length before swallowing, and closes his performance on a melancholy note, with an important announcement.

"What do you want, I'm an apparatchik, a self-serving little apparatchik. No, don't contradict me, I know what I'm saying. After all, I'm not stupid. Perhaps a bit of an ass, now and then, but not stupid, no way. An apparatchik, that's what I am, you bet. On that point, can't do a thing, to each his own. *Jedem das Seine*, as the others used to say . . . Oh yes, I even know a smidgen of German, you bet, it's not so surprising, I've done a lot of traveling. I'm just saying that all this isn't that simple anymore, the way some people seem to think. No, it's not at all simple anymore, believe me. They're mistaken, those who think that this new social category is a simple, homogeneous one. No, not even those guys in the Securitate . . . No, not even them, they're not all in the same bag. And let me say that there are lots of people who get us mixed up with them. Especially these last few years, people figure everyone's a

snitch, on the payroll of the secret police. Well, that's more an expression of widespread exasperation than the truth. A shortcut like a lot of others, you bet. But what . . . what was I saying? . . . Oh, yes: the newspapers say that the Party official is the true hero of postwar life. Or else the true hero of postwar literature, hey? What do you think?"

Proud of himself, he looks around at his audience. And his audience is attentive, his audience hangs, breathlessly, on his every word, and follows as well, and just as attentively, his faithful observer, which is to say the innocence and astonishment and childish participant enthusiasm and torment of the bookish man suddenly fallen among down-to-earthlings, but also the joy of the researcher, the pure joy of the scientist.

"So, which one? The true hero of life or of literature? *And*, not or . . . The hero of postwar life *and* its literature! The same old line. Pure demagoguery, everyone's fed up with that blah-blah-blah. And yet! And yet . . . if you think about it . . . the paradox is that . . . yes, yes, it's even true! Days and nights and years wasted in Party meetings and campaigns for a goal that's . . . unattainable. The authorities have no desire to admit this, you bet. If they admit the truth, which is becoming clearer and clearer to them, well then, it would be obvious that the heroes of these gigantic and useless efforts, dedicated to an absurd and never-ending mission, yes, yes, you've got it—they themselves are the heroes. It took me a while to realize this, little by little . . . We've all realized it, the dreamers and careerists and hangers-on. I won't mention which category I belong in, oh no, forget that. I'm simply saying

that all I am is a poor *parvenu*. An apparatchik, a postwar hero . . ."

The hero has finished his number, but the Learned One continues to gaze at him in fascination. He'd like to add a comment or two, but his lips are moving too rapidly, silently. He'd really like to say something, though, and he makes an effort, but still can't get the words out, and, turning back to Dina, gives his full attention once more to the club thumb of Madame Beldeanu. Yes, the same thick, stumpy, truncated thumb of their adolescence. For here is a flaw to which time has brought no stunning remedy, has it, no remedy, how about that! And yet the fine wine and the delectable meal and Felicia more beautiful than ever in her noble serenity and discretion, and Ioana so vivacious, so scintillating, and Ali so generous, so at ease, even Dina, hitting just the right note of gracious warmth, don't you think, yes, yes, even Vasile with his imposing, majestic belly, a classic paunch, isn't it, and his bristling pepper-and-salt mustache, and his thick, unruly iron-gray hair, very distinguished, isn't he, a patrician *bon vivant*, affable, courteous, yes, even Vasile, and everything, everyone is perfect, a really perfect evening, isn't it, such blissful relaxation, away from the bitterness and depression and fear, yes, far from the fear that permeates our daily lives, yes, yes, a moment of respite, a moment stolen, wrenched from the system, as it were, an escape, a stubborn, rebellious, and passionate disregard for our present predicament.

The evening ends in a flurry of handshaking and cheek-kissing. A real but agreeable feeling of fatigue. Even the

Stoians, initially reserved and anxious not to seem too thrilled about the whole thing (because you never know), so that they wouldn't seem like close friends of the Beldeanus—even the Stoians have loosened up, they're having a grand old time, bubbling with enthusiasm and pleased with the success of this little get-together, so it looks as though an evening at the Beldeanus' isn't the last word in utter boredom, you can have quite an enjoyable time there as long as you accept the kind of relationship involved, obviously, obviously.

The gratified hosts accompany their rowdy guests to the door with affectionate zeal, Don Bazil's hoarse voice booming out paternally, "Make sure you haven't forgotten anything! Drive carefully, that wet asphalt is slippery. Watch out you don't skid, be careful, careful, don't forget!"

In the courtyard, near the car, the Guileless One manages, belatedly, to utter the word he'd tried in vain to produce after their host's speech. "Ma-magisterial! Magi-magisterial," stammers the Kid. "Ex-periment, ex-quisite, ex, wasn't it? Magi-magis . . ." mumbles the Learned One, dead-drunk, clinging to the arm of that beanpole Ali, who's just as drunk, soused, pickled, bombed.

"Perfect, perfect, obviously, ob-vi-ous-ly," agrees Ali, while the Kid agrees with him, "Mar-mar-marvelous, I sw-swear." And they stagger around like that, in each other's arms, slowly, so slowly, teetering around the cosmic, yellow, aerodynamic craft that awaits them.

Ioana's the one who takes the wheel, ticked off but sober,

full of contempt for masculine weakness, but sober, in control of the situation.

The rain stopped quite a while ago. The air is cool, the night clear, the city lost in darkness, in sleep, and galaxies. Overhead, an ocean of stars, and the moon, here's the moon, glacial, somnambulistic, cadaverous, the ancient moon, lyrical, demoniac, the vigilant moon, perfidious, all-seeing, surrounded by the ocean of harmless stars. The ocean above and confusion within us, beyond us, before us, chance and the law, stars and the moon in the sky up above and the gamble of daily life here below, for us, *Terra incognita, confusa*, chance and the law, the enigma of tomorrow, and tomorrow, and after tomorrow.

Monday was the proper day to make the thank-you call. The Stoians were probably dragging listlessly around their apartment. Wiped out, with an extra dose of the blahs because it was raining again.

"We should phone Bazil and Dina, to thank them," suggested Ioana.

Ali looked up from his typewriter. "Thank them? We're colleagues, after all, Don Bazil and I, we don't stand on ceremony. He should be the one to thank me instead, for going over today to pick up his stupid article and drop it off at the office. Mister High-and-Mighty didn't have time to do it himself. He got up late and had to go off and do something else."

"Fine, but what about Lady Di and her grand airs? Come on, you couldn't have missed how hard she was trying last

night to seem relaxed and informal, poor thing. Playing at being just us folks, with her fancy dishes and furniture! Then she's amazed when her guests never come back . . ."

"You know times have gotten hard even for people like them. Bazil has to perform incredible contortions to get hold of the slightest trifle. Before, it was a piece of cake to get that stuff, and now he has to go through all sorts of crap. For the little things, obviously, for every little thing."

"Perhaps, but I'm not going to waste time shedding tears over their fate. I mean, there are others who deserve compassion a lot more than they do."

"So you're going to give them a call?"

"Me? Why me? Why don't you call her, she'd appreciate it more coming from you."

"I think you're the one she's expecting to hear from. Or else she'll think something went wrong. You know how women are."

"And how would I know? I'm a woman? Me? All right, fine, I'll call later, after I've had my bath."

But Ioana Stoian doubtless forgot to call the Beldeanus Monday evening.

The other couple didn't manage to rise to the occasion as promptly as they should have either, it seems.

Returning home late that Monday night from her sad trip to the countryside, Felicia had barely strength enough to relate the exasperating details to her husband (the filthy, overcrowded train, the arrogance and indifference of the

doctor, her mother's terrified weeping over her approaching end) before collapsing in bed, exhausted.

Since she taught only three hours on Tuesday, Felicia was able to come home early the next day and get some rest. That evening, presumably, they finally got around to the appropriate discussion.

Felicia's clear, even voice wafted in from the kitchen. "If we call now, we're still within the bounds of good manners."

"And if we don't? It would only mean the end of something that never really existed" was the probable baritone reply, launched from the depths of a comfortable reading chair.

"It took you five whole years to accept that invitation. Dina has always been nice to me. She's helped me get paper supplies and frames and paints. While I, I've always been standoffish with her. For no reason. Except that you absolutely didn't want to get involved in any way with the Beldeanus. Now the visit's over and done with, so we ought to wind the whole thing up properly."

"Fine, call her, if you like," agreed the husband, joining her in the cramped kitchen.

"I have no desire to get Comrade Vasile on the other end of the line," objected Felicia, tossing back her heavy curls with an irritated shake of her head.

"Comrade Beldeanu left Monday morning on a business trip. Ali told me so. Worn out, I understand, from doing the dishes the previous evening. Did you know that Vasile was the dishwasher? A model husband, that's what I've



learned. He bends over backward to make things easier for his wife. He's the one who does the errands, the food shopping, the housework. A veritable paragon, no question. He's definitely out of town. Yesterday morning Ali went to pick up some article for him, something Comrade Beldeanu didn't have time to drop off at the office himself."

"Apart from his biography . . . I think Vasile is rather pleasant. Well, not necessarily his political biography, I mean his social standing. You understand what I mean."

"I understand, but it doesn't interest me. Anyhow, he isn't home. You can telephone without any problem."

"It would be nice if you called. A nice surprise. A warm gesture, something to take the chill off this whole thing."

"You're asking too much, believe me. I'm already too exotic for La Beldeanu, have been ever since we were kids: the minor provincial celebrity with great expectations. Then the young scientist with so many prospects, a brilliant career ahead of him. Then, inexplicably, he jumps the track. Just when he's hitting his stride, what does this loser do but give up his career, suddenly, just like that, the way losers always do. Why do you think they wanted to invite me in the first place? To see this rare bird! The sideshow freak, the lunatic. Something to shake them out of their boredom, spice up that tasteless soup of their dull-as-dishwater daily routine."

"Tasteless or not, you can't possibly know a thing about it. Vasile can't be having an easy time of it either, these days. His political file isn't spotless anymore, after all. Married to a woman from a minority group that . . . the most . . . well, you know what I'm getting at. Ethnic

purity, today's principal criterion of selection. And she's got her own problems, I mean you couldn't exactly say the past was a paradise for her, or the present either, for that matter. The camp, then coming back, and a difficult adolescence, then she has that love affair and gets thrown out of the house by old Berg, that bigot, and everything that happened next. Living with Vasile can't be all that exciting. It's true she's walled herself up in that sort of frozen ritual she goes through, the Great Lady, but . . . Besides, I'd be surprised if she were interested in you just for your novelty value. You've known each other since childhood, after all. It would be natural for her to feel a certain nostalgic kinship."

"You mean those games up in the attic? No, really, I don't feel up to calling. Each word would be checked out under a microscope, I'd wind up sounding like a Martian. Bingo, I'd find myself flirting with her out of sheer nervousness, some kind of ridiculous hysterical fit. You know what Ali said? He sure knows how to put things. She needs a good thrashing to loosen her up; otherwise, forget it. No, it would be better if we just forgot all about this polite thank-you business, believe me."

Two days after the dinner party, it seems, Ioana Stoian did get around to calling after all, to thank the Beldeanus, especially Dina, for the wonderful evening they'd spent together. On the dot of nine, as it happened, Dina recognized Felicia's lovely voice. Conventional expressions of gratitude, true, but spoken in such limpid, glowing tones that it was a joy to listen to her, all the more so in that Felicia seemed genuinely moved, yes, touched, paus-

ing here and there, while the words that should have followed seemed snapped up by a silent void . . . A habit of Felicia's that Dina was familiar with.

"A most enjoyable evening for us. The gracious atmosphere . . . such a delightful dinner . . . sincerely . . . such a pleasure."

"Ah, but we wouldn't have done it for simply anyone. We did it just for you. I hadn't spoken to your husband for thirty years, can you imagine! I ran into him every now and then in the street, but we never stopped to chat. He'd say hello, that's all."

"Oh, you know how he is . . . not very sociable . . . never says a word . . . even at your house. But he had a lovely time, I promise you . . . He even got drunk, that's unusual . . . it was good for him, good . . . to get out and see people . . . a hermit otherwise, just a hermit."

Felicia let herself get carried away by this flood of banality, and quite without meaning to, went overboard. "Now, since Vasile isn't there, you're all alone, you could stop by and see us."

Her husband gave a start in his armchair when he heard this invitation, and flung his hands up in despair. Startled in turn by his antics, Felicia temporarily lost her voice, but Lady Di seemed to have sensed this element of hesitation in time.

"I don't know, I don't think so. I've got too much work at the moment. It's been getting harder and harder these last years. I'm in court every day, there's an endless stream of lawsuits. The laws are constantly changing, always new restrictions, more and more hopeless situations. It's not

only the people who are fighting among themselves, institutions are at war with one another as well. You can feel how fed up people are in the courtroom, too, not just on the milk line. The judges are overwhelmed. Oh, I wanted to ask you . . . Did you perhaps forget a raincoat when you were here?"

Taken aback, Felicia has trouble finding something to say. She answers with some difficulty. "What? Excuse me? No, no, I don't believe so, maybe Ioana, try Ioana, I wouldn't know. What? Oh, no, Ali, I see, yes, perhaps Ali, I don't know."

"Someone left a raincoat behind the evening you came. I mean, I didn't see it until the next afternoon, when I got home. That morning, when I left, I was in a hurry, and too tired to notice a thing. Perhaps Ali, yes, or maybe Ioana. I forgot to ask. She just called me, too, a little while ago, but I didn't remember to ask her about it. No, it's not important. Nothing, really, I'll just call her now and find out."

In fact, it seems that Dina Beldeanu did call the Stoians right away, but no one answered.

It was only two days later that Ali had a long, friendly conversation with the wife of his absent colleague, at the end of which he was asked the same question and gave the same reply.

"A raincoat? What raincoat? No, it's not ours . . . Absolutely certain, it's not ours. No, me, I don't wear them. Besides, when I stopped by your place on Monday, around noon, yes, it must have been around noon, I didn't see

any raincoat on the coat tree. Well, I didn't look very carefully, obviously—so I don't know, haven't a clue."

Two days later, however, Dina called back. "Ioana? You know, I spoke to Ali the other day. I don't know if he mentioned it to you . . ."

Silence. A long pause. Each waits for the other to speak.

"Well, it's not important. I asked him about a raincoat. I don't know if he spoke to you about it."

Another pause, even longer. But the dialogue finally gets going again.

"You asked him about . . . about what? A raincoat? What raincoat?"

"I don't know, a raincoat, that's all. It's silly, excuse me, I must be overreacting. The next morning, after you were here for dinner, I noticed a raincoat in the hall. I mean, no, not that morning, that afternoon, when I got home. I asked Ali if it belonged to you by any chance. He . . ."

"He told you he doesn't wear a raincoat. I suppose that's what he answered, right? He said no, and that's true. As for my raincoat, it's hanging right here. No, I'm positive, it's not ours."

"I'm sorry, it's irritating, I don't know why this silly business is bothering me so much. It's just a stupid little thing. But it's . . . how can I put this, it's unpleasant, simply unpleasant, I'm very sorry."

"I understand, I quite understand. You never know, a strange object that turns up in your home, I understand, it's aggravating, naturally. There's an explanation, don't worry, these days nobody's simply going to abandon his

belongings. Someone will claim it, you can count on that, especially since . . . you're not dealing with careless people who can't remember where they've been or what they were wearing. I suppose you've asked . . ."

"Yes, yes, I spoke to Felicia, too. I bothered them as well with this mystery."

But Dina—big surprise—couldn't resist calling the other couple again.

The telephone rang a long time, a long time . . . Finally someone picked up the receiver, although no one actually spoke. There was no voice, even though someone had answered the phone at last. And yet, yes, yes, it seemed someone was there, hesitating to speak.

"Hello, yes, who . . ."

"Oh, it's me, Di . . ." Then she fell helplessly silent. She hadn't expected him to answer, she couldn't manage to go on talking, she was completely lost . . . Now, what use was it to bring up . . . that idiotic business of the raincoat . . . No, it didn't make sense anymore . . . She didn't know where to start, had forgotten what she'd intended to say.

"You wanted to speak to Felicia, right? Hmm, yes, I'm not usually the one who answers the phone. Well, what can I tell you, you've got no choice, you'll have to chat with me, that's just the way it goes."

Dina tries to protest, what a nice surprise, for a long time now she's been wanting to . . . but it's too late, his monologue is off and running. All attempts to interrupt, to object, or to qualify the suppositions and reminiscences

that pour forth in a torrent, in a frenetic hodgepodge—all attempts would prove useless.

"I'm not an easy person to talk to, am I, we haven't had a conversation for a long, long time, since childhood . . . a lifetime. And even then we didn't really talk, just those weird games, in the courtyard of the Berg house, with your cousin and my classmate . . . what was his name, whatever was his name, Snookie, Mookie, I can't remember, but him I remember perfectly, with those big teeth, buck teeth that stuck out beyond his lips, a sweet boy, really kindhearted, I heard he'd become a soldier, it surprised me, maybe he never even had a choice, everyone in that country's gotten tougher, too big a clash between ancient ways and new ones, yes, yes, the climate, the Arabs, the waves of new arrivals, wars, neurosis, yes, I remember Hymie perfectly, oh yes, Hymie, that was the name, yes, yes, your cousin, the big courtyard, with all those trees, and that sort of 'penthouse' we had . . . up in the attic, you had to climb a ladder to get there, remember, too precocious, the two of us, weren't we, yes, yes, a lifetime ago . . . Thirty years, a lifetime, we haven't spoken to each other since those days, that's how it goes, growing more and more set in our ways, losing that spark, that lively curiosity, yes, yes, curiosity and playfulness just fade away, don't they, experience wears them down, the spark dies out, we turn into lumps, trapped inside our own images, stiff, uncomfortable, inside our legends, our coffins . . . An arrogant woman, why not say so, arrogant, elegant, privileged, yes, that stupid word is the most appro-

priate one, isn't it . . . I'm taking advantage of this unexpected phone call, who knows if we'll ever . . . I mean, I'm not very talkative, practically a recluse, yes, yes, I'm not very sociable, not much for conversations, something different for me . . . I hope I'm not offending you, my naïve sincerity, isn't it, another experiment, isn't it, yes, yes, cruel, I mean, and there's no reason for it, no reason, but still, it's a sign of sympathy, with me sincerity is a sign of sympathy, and it's only with people close to me that I try this experiment, yes, I'm constantly ex . . . ex . . . An arrogant, vain, stupid woman, that's what I wanted to say, that's what you seemed to be . . . then there was that legend, wasn't there, when you ran away or were kicked out of, you know, during your last year of high school, the great love affair with your classmate Vasile Beldeanu, of all people, why him, was it, I ask you, inexplicable, inex . . . ex . . . inex . . . Young girl at a difficult age, that must have been it . . . Completely unforeseeable, I mean, who could have imagined that this poor clod, how shall I put it, just impossible to foretell the future, not an option, ruled out, excluded, ex . . . And even if we'd known, yes, known what was coming, it wouldn't have made any fundamental, essential difference, would it, well, that's not the question, no, no . . . Not even your father, poor old Berg, I'm sorry, that terrible episode . . . No, he couldn't have known what would happen, not even your own father, but it wouldn't have changed a thing in any case, would it, hardly likely that we'd ever be able to talk to each other, I know, a con-

ventional woman who in the past, however, did defy convention . . . I mean, when, you know . . . when the father curses his daughter, I mean the malediction, the expulsion and ritual burial, as though his only child were dead, you know, as though the old man, without knowing it, without suspecting that, without, no, it's not possible, he had no idea that within a week he would be, he of all people, I mean, he was the one who, well, barely a week later, his own funeral, he was actually dead and buried, poor old Berg, the old bigot, poor man . . . And yet social conventions are back in favor, except that now these standards are perfectly stupid, frivolous, superficial, whereas that dramatic faith, as irrational as it may have been, was still, yes . . . Well, that's not the point, the old man couldn't stomach his daughter's relationship with, well, with those who, yes, yes, the age-old psychosis of the ghetto, right . . . No one knew what the future would bring, and anyway it wasn't important, I know, the years at the university, years of poverty, estranged from your family and friends, then suddenly the career, it's been an outstanding one, hasn't it . . . Although his wife's background hasn't exactly helped him along, I know, that's the least one can say, otherwise he'd have been ensconced in a choicer position a long time ago, right at the top, just look at the big shots we've got now, lousy employees with their pathetic privileges, yes, yes, Vasile could have gone much further, a remarkable career . . . What I meant to say was, we're all prisoners of our images, our past, it was hard for us to communicate . . . And the stories about me, the legend of

course, the non-violent protests, giving up my scientific career, a sort of Gandhi, one would have thought, who knows, I was some kind of hero, not at all, far from it, a tired man, worn out, yes, all the reading, yes, a joy, I won't deny it, and the book, well, I won't deny it, a success, yes, yes, one shouldn't exaggerate the success of a book, crisis, no more, no less, the expression of a sense of impasse, absolutely true, but mine wasn't the only dilemma, we've all been there, it's the story of our generation, the children of the war, not only the war, there's something else, we haven't found the right label yet . . . I'm rarely off in a trance like this, very rarely . . . It's the morphine of boredom, that's what it is, another experiment, isn't it, 'developed multilaterally,' that's what all those newspapers say, stuffed with lies, no, it's not society that's developed multilaterally but boredom and poverty and terror . . . We're used to it, of course, we've been used to it from childhood . . . Yes, yes, let's keep things in proportion, sure, I was talking about boredom, I mean, that deadly monotony and the multilateral boredom of language, of submission, conventions, don't forget those murderous conventions, incurable, real killers, unless we can find something else, a new experiment, an explosion, an ex, yes, we know exactly which one, but before then there will be other ones, ex, extra-, lots of others, soon, extra-, always more, plenty more . . ."

And so on, for almost an hour.

That very evening, the guilty party will probably report this fit of uncontrollable logorrhea to his wife.

"I was vulgar and aggressive. The thrill of saying mean things. An impulsive, crazy, sadistic thing to do. The neurosis of boredom. I mentioned that to her, by the way, I must have babbled some stuff about boredom, perhaps she saw the connection, an incriminating excuse. In any case, we've definitely gotten rid of Lady Di—it'll be a long time before she turns up again! I don't think she'll even say hello to me now. Stuck-up and bitchy the way she is, I couldn't have offended her more if I'd tried. Especially since I'm not even a drunk, I haven't even got that excuse, I'm not Vasile, that's another excuse down the drain. Well, that's how it goes . . . So much for the Beldeanus. We're all of us better off like this, aren't we, since there wasn't any point to the relationship anyway."

And yet, only two days later, Dina called and spoke briefly to Felicia, referring curtly to the impulsive invitation made during their previous conversation. "Perhaps it was simply idle talk, but as it happens, I would like to stop by one of these days. In the afternoon. For a half hour, if I may. Nothing fancy, just to see you . . ."

"Yes, of course, please do," said Felicia with a sigh, giving in without a fight. "I'll speak to . . . Yes, yes, I'll call you tomorrow."

"No, don't bother. If we put this off, we'll lose interest, especially since we probably don't have much in the first place. There's no need to change your plans for me, no need for the both of you to be there, or even for anyone to be home at all, if you're busy elsewhere. I'll simply stop by, and if you're there, fine. If not, there's no problem,

I'll come by some other time. Half an hour, no more. That's all, really. Tomorrow, after court. I've two cases tomorrow. Let's say around six o'clock. Tomorrow, then, if you can. For a half hour. So, six o'clock, six-fifteen. Don't go to any trouble, please. No preparations, nothing fancy . . ."

And *basta*, goodbye. Click, finished, end of conversation.

Felicia paralyzed, still holding the receiver. The guilty husband—livid. Now what do they do? How do they get ready for this confrontation? Dina, with her grand manner, think of it, Dina: I'll drop by to see you, just like that. I'll stop by, a simple visit. What a thought, Dina. Dina suddenly being friendly, familiar, informal! Tomorrow, or some other time, no problem. What an idea! A long, vast, swelling, infinite silence filled the room.

Dina appears the next day, at the appointed time. Elegant, as always, especially since she was coming from work at the courthouse. A very simple hairdo, a chignon, with a clip to match her dark hair. Relaxed, rather tired, cordial. No sophisticated airs, quite natural, period.

She takes part in the usual review of current topics, the same old ones, of course. Multilateral ennui, the lack of heat, the press and its lies, the black market, the long lines, the long ideological meetings, the long-lived Boss, the censored letters, the tapping of phones, but also the crappy paper used to print fewer and fewer books, the abolishment of subsidies to theaters, which get by thanks to their scenery departments, where they make and sell

coffins, a rare commodity, almost impossible to find . . .

The moment the judge arrived, the brains of the household had tossed out these hot topics for discussion in an effort to keep certain others from being mentioned.

Lady Di chats without enthusiasm, but also without her usual affectation. She drinks her tea quietly, smiles at a few of her former playmate's sarcastic remarks. She behaves absolutely . . . normally, excessively so, even with undue moderation and good sense. She brings the visit to an abrupt end shortly after a half hour, as promised.

That very evening, the Stoians will be given a full report of the occasion by phone.

The men will comment jokingly and at length, in rather vulgar terms, on the effects of Bazil's absence, but their main topic will be the humanizing impact—that effort to seem natural and down-to-earth—so noticeable in the privileged class during periods of crisis. One man will fidget constantly with his glasses, while his friend on the other end of the line scratches his kinky black African hair.

The bomb will explode only at the end of the conversation. So Dina has invited herself over to the Stoians' as well! A short visit, the following day. She just wanted to stop by and see them. A half hour, that's all. No particular reason, nothing special. Just half an hour, to say hello. Not really a visit, simply dropping by for thirty minutes or so on the way home from court.

It seems that her visit to the Stoians' is just like the other one. Dina stays only half an hour. She behaves extremely naturally . . . abnormally so, Ali will remark. The hu-

morous commentary had already taken on a slightly artificial tone, a routine that had lost its punch line.

There were no further visits. Only long-short-long phone conversations, Morse-code communications, sometimes with Ioana, blinking behind her eyeglasses, sometimes with Felicia, cooing in her soothing, velvety voice, both of them growing more and more indifferent to these repeated phone calls. The men's jokes begin to grow stale, sheepish, almost intimidated as well by the constancy of that strange natural behavior flaunted by Dina Beldeanu. A friendly, agreeable simplicity. Extremely, extra-agreeable . . . Imagine that! All four of them gradually realize that it's true—and it's just too much! The Guileless One keeps exclaiming excitedly over this marvel. It's the last thing anyone would have expected, isn't it, never ever ever, what an experience, an ex, I swear!

When Vasile gets back, we'll see what comes of it . . . Comes of what, I'd like to know . . . We'll have to see how we'll get out of this . . . We might end up buddy-buddy with Comrade Beldeanu . . . As though the ambiguous position we're already in weren't enough, oh no. If you think about it, we don't really know anything about the Stoians, either, except that they're nice people and that they're the ones who urged us to visit, at long last, our distinguished friends from way back when, no, we can't forget that detail, can we, mustn't allow ourselves to forget that.

Luckily, Felicia wouldn't hear of such suspicions and preached love for one's fellow man: This is ridiculous, no one has the right to think like that, nobody's forcing you

to get involved with other people, you can stay all alone for as long as you like, but if you accept, then . . . As for Ioana, you've worked together for so many years, over at your research institute, you know her, you know her even too well, I'm sure of it, there was something going on between you two, I'd bet on it, I can feel it, I'm not wrong, I can sense it, I'm convinced of it, she did more than just translate your work into English, I'm certain there was more to it than that, and I wonder . . . how can you talk that way, you suspect everyone, you're afraid of everybody, even though, even though . . . you know for a fact that those you fear the most can spy on us how and when they like, they don't need intermediaries, and what's more they don't even need to spy on us, they own us, in any case, they can do whatever they want whenever they want.

Everyone knew that little Felicia was capable, if necessary, of phenomenal bursts of energy.

Which was about to be proved once again, naturally, be sure of it, sure of it.

"What can you possibly imagine they might need from us? It would more likely be the other way around, believe me. Vasile's told you a million times to come to him if you have the slightest problem. Problem, that's the word they use, that's how they speak. The slightest problem, that's what he said to you. And God knows you've got some! Why do you think they might call us? What have we got to offer them? Empty pockets and long faces."

It's clear the Kid won't take this lying down, no way.

"Yes, but they haven't anyone else! Bigwigs bored shitless with other bigwigs. They want something else, some-

thing more exotic. Milady Dina feels like a change of air; as for Vasile, Comrade Vasile . . . You never know what he's up to, so it's useless to try to reassure me!"

Surprise: after the return of Comrade Beldeanu to hearth and home, there were no more phone calls from Madame.

Not a peep, from either Lady Di or Comrade Vasile. A day goes by, then two, then three . . . Go figure! Felicia and the Kid waited, tense with anticipation. They'd cooked up all sorts of convincing pretexts for avoiding another visit. The Beldeanus' silence amazed them. They seemed to grow more and more anxious. It's not good to play around with *that kind of person, they can be really vindictive* . . . Arrogant, inhibited, and screwed up! shouted the Child, losing control in a burst of panic. Of course, anyone can become vindictive, sighed his long-suffering wife. Maybe she's upset, angry, they're only human, after all. The Learned One had decided, however, that he would absolutely not make the next move.

It seems that after about a week Felicia called Ioana to see if she had any news. No, Dina hadn't gotten in touch with the Stoians, either. Had anything happened? No, nothing. Ali would have heard about it, Ali saw Bazil every day, no, nothing in particular.

The subject must have come up again in the men's conversation. Felicia's husband asked Ioana's husband if he'd heard anything lately about the wife of Vasile Bazil Beldeanu. What's going on, what's happened? She'd vanished as suddenly as she'd appeared. A comet, come and gone, joked the Brat. His friend calmly ignored this display of



teasing adolescent humor. The question was repeated. A grunt was the only answer. Intrigued by this mystery, the Guileless One wouldn't give up. Ali replied as though reciting a lesson in school: nothing in particular. The phrase had a decisive ring to it, clear and definite. Clear and false. As though, somehow, there was still something . . . something unusual, perhaps.

And so the men took a walk together in town.

"Well, what happened? Come on, spit it out. I could tell, you couldn't say anything on the phone. Now let's have it."

"Things aren't going too well . . ."

"What do you mean? The trip didn't work out? He wasn't able to stuff the car with chickens or booze? Or was it that he couldn't cadge enough gas?"

"No, he's not the problem. I'm not talking about him."

"Ah, Lady Di. She finally caught him with a secretary or a Party groupie?"

"No, that's not it. You'll laugh, but Basil's scared to death of Dina. He doesn't try any funny business within three hundred kilometers of home."

"So, what then? Three hundred kilometers wasn't enough? You told me he traveled all over the country. Romania's pretty big, isn't it, and it isn't the Holy Land either, if you get my drift."

"It's her, she's the one who's not doing well. Poor Basil, he's deeply worried. Really worried, believe me, I'm not joking. These problems, you know; it's not easy to find answers for them."

"It was inevitable! An organic reaction. No, not organic, a reaction of the entire being, body and soul and spirit, to alienation. Self-alienation. Marriage produces breaks like that, you know. Or the tyranny of the state, of parental authority, a routine job, lots of other things. A void, nothing, unavoidable emptiness . . ."

"Drop all this philosophizing, it's serious."

"And philosophy isn't, right? But why don't you tell me exactly what's wrong? With all this secrecy, you'd think Dina had joined a dissident movement."

"No, that's not the problem, obviously. It's very confused. She's a bit . . . shaken. She can't get back on track."

Ali flicked away his cigarette and crushed it out beneath the sole of his huge shoe. He studied at length his short friend's glasses. He studied his friend, with a look of boredom and irritation on his face.

"Since that business. With the trenchcoat."

"Which trenchcoat?"

"What? What which? *The raincoat*, I'm telling you . . . that one. The phone calls. After we went there for dinner. You don't remember?"

"What?"

"Don't you remember? She asked us if we hadn't left a raincoat at their place that evening."

"No, not me. She never spoke to me about it, not to me. Felicia, perhaps. But no, I don't think so. She would've mentioned it to me. No, I don't believe so . . ."

"You don't believe so? Are you out of your mind? Of course she called you. Apparently she called everyone. She even called our house one morning when she knew we

weren't there so she could speak to our son, and of course Dorin didn't know what she was talking about. She was clearly checking up on us, checking to see if we'd been telling the truth about the kind of raincoats we had. She went crazy from asking all over town about this thing. Now she's clammed up."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean, what do I mean! As if you didn't know! She called you too, obviously. And not just once, twice. I checked. The people she trusted, she called them twice."

"Well then, she didn't trust us, because she didn't call us. Felicia mentioned nothing to me about it."

"She said nothing to you because it was nothing important. It just seemed like some nonsense."

"So, wasn't it? Nothing important, I mean? What trenchcoat . . . what the hell is all this fuss about, what trenchcoat?"

Ali lighted another cigarette. Drawing the collar of his jacket closer around his neck, he looked up at the sky. The clear, lifeless, inscrutable sky. Brisk, seasonable weather. The street along which they were walking was deserted. Neither said a word. Ali considered his candid companion once more.

"Monday, the day after we had dinner there, Dina found—I mean, she noticed—a raincoat that didn't belong to them, hanging on the coat tree in the hall. That's what she says . . . She asked us first, of course, to see if it might belong to us. Then she asked you the same thing. Then she asked other people. Over and over again, it just didn't

make sense. She got completely worked up over this, it seems. Then she stopped asking people about it."

"You mean she found the culprit? The owner?"

"The owner! The culprit! No! No, no, that's not the problem . . . What owner? The raincoat's still in the same spot, hanging on the coat tree. That's what I'm told . . . In the Beldeanus' hall. No one knows whether she understood or not. Suddenly she just stopped talking about it. It's not clear why. From fear, evidently. But no one knows. Fear because she understood, or fear because she didn't understand at all? Basil can't figure out exactly what's gnawing at her, where things have gone wrong. She refuses to see a doctor. As though doctors . . . Anyway, the whole thing's a mess."

"Oh, fine," observed the Kid, looking innocently up at his friend Al. I. Stoian, known as Ali, hoping he realized at last that his companion hadn't any idea what he was talking about, not the faintest idea. He understood, didn't understand, understood too much, hard to tell, with all the questions he was asking.

"You said you stopped by their place Monday morning."

"Yes, I went by before noon, before going to the office."

"Oh, right, so you did stop by. Actually, you told me that, that you'd been there on Monday."

"Basil called to tell me he was in a hurry, that he'd hardly had the time to write his article, he was worn out from the dinner party. He had to leave, so he asked me if I'd come pick up the article and take it to the paper."

"Aha! Fine. He asked you to stop by and then you went over."

"Why, what do you mean? What exactly are you insinuating? You keep questioning me, what is it you don't understand?"

"Nothing. Everything. I'm repeating what you tell me. You went there, you picked up the text, you took it to the paper."

"Yes, I stopped by for a few moments. But that's not the problem, dammit!"

"Then what is the problem?"

"That's not the problem. It's got nothing to do with it, nothing to do with anything, Kid, that's not the problem."

"And the trenchcoat?"

"What trenchcoat?"

"*The raincoat!* The raincoat in the hall, where was it?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Ali screamed. "I've never seen the damn thing! I haven't laid eyes on it, and that's not the problem, I've already told you!"

The Learned One's mild, skeptical gaze wavered beneath the furious glare of the tall, lanky man.

"When I went over to their house," continued Ali, trotting out the same alibi, "I didn't see any raincoat. I didn't even look to see if there was, yes or no, a raincoat. There wasn't one, evidently. I had no reason to stay and look around. Besides, I don't even remember if there was one or not, I haven't the slightest idea! But damn it all, that's not the problem!"

"But then what *is* the problem? The problem, that's what you keep repeating, the problem. That's what you

say. So there must be one, some problem, somewhere . . ."

Ali stared at him, flabbergasted. The Learned One gave him a long, suspicious, guilty look before turning away, and Ali gave him a long, suspicious, furious look before turning away. Neither spoke for a while.

The Kid looked up at a confused mass of clouds in the sky, then down at *Terra incognita, confusa*, and his step slowed even more.

"The coat, the overcoat then . . ." sighed the Guileless One.

Ali was a few paces ahead of him. His stride was long and swift, his bearing imperious, angry, awkward.

"What overcoat?" Ali turned around, raising his arms to heaven, becoming even taller, one might have said, reaching his long arms up to grab hold of the sky, of something, anything.

"Well, the trenchcoat. The coat, you know," repeated the Guileless One. "The overcoat! You've read his stuff? The madman? The one with the big nose . . ."

"What madman? What big nose?"

"Well, the inspector. The inspector! The inspector with the big nose. The nose! The madman. The diary of a madman . . . The little devil with the big nose! Nikolai Vasilevich, who wrapped us all up in his Overcoat."

Every now and then, the Guileless One mumbled, in time with his dragging footsteps, "The overcoat, right, naturally, the overcoat . . ."

Ali smiled indulgently. He'd slowed down, stopped taking those long, hurried strides that the shorter man at his

side could not, it seemed, match, since he refused to alter his own moderate, calm, composed tread. Ali ran a hand through his kinky black hair. He rubbed his forehead and temples impatiently.

"Well, Dina must have figured out things, all these years. Perhaps she knew quite a lot, or maybe she didn't want to know. Marriage is marriage. People who live together live together, after all. Bazil isn't a thug, but he isn't an angel, either. When you go up a ladder, you push a little bit here and there, you knock a few guys down some rungs, you do a few things in the darkness too, when nobody's watching . . . Maybe it took her this long to crack. The straw that breaks the camel's back. The drop that makes the whole glass overflow. A harmless drop, like so many others, but suddenly it turns red, blood-red, and it changes . . . What's that stuff called . . . Right, litmus paper. It changes the color of the litmus paper . . ."

He fell silent. He didn't think his explanations were sufficient, or clear enough, for the complex and childish mind of the Learned One, who still clung to his guileless expression and insistent, naïve questions, questions that were suspiciously insistent and naïve. As though he'd known for a long time all that anyone could tell him, and even a great deal more, and as though he asked questions like that to conform to a script, because he didn't trust friend Ali or anyone else. He felt friendly only toward the truth, you see, just the truth, or because he wanted to avoid arousing friend Ali's suspicions by continuing to play the same ethereal, guileless role, incognito, experimental, far removed

from all those mundane imbroglios he found it so fascinating to toy with.

"The drop isn't special in any way, any way at all," continued Ali the pedagogue, on his second wind. "It's not blood, if you want my opinion, it's not blood anymore. Even those creeps who keep an eye on us all, even they've become apathetic. That's right, apathetic! They plod through their jobs with their eyes on their paychecks at the end of the month. They write reports to look busy; otherwise, there'd be layoffs in the ranks, and they'd lose their perks. Careless, quick work, with no point to it. It's not just the hammer and the sickle that swing away in a vacuum! Even that institution . . . THE INSTITUTION, that is, you know the one I mean, obviously. The Fundamental Institution! Ineffective, just like all its subcontractors. All sorts of resources at its command, of course, and yet it's humming along in a vacuum, my dear Scholar! In a vacuum, believe me. Just think about it . . . They're constantly filling files and cabinets. Reports, nuggets of information, boxes and boxes of it. And then? Zip! Big zero, Kid . . . It turns out they can't make use of all this stuff they endlessly compile and sift and hoard. Gone are the days of the guy from Soviet Georgia with the walrus mustache . . . When I listen to those characters on the other side, over there in the consumer's paradise, nattering away about Utopia and Terror! What utopia—that idea fell by the wayside some time ago . . . As though they and their pragmatism had come up with a solution! Go check them out, Simpleton, if you want to see consumer paradise, what the absence of utopia looks like. And take a little look

around right here to see the absence of everything, utopia included. But they don't arrest thousands of people in the middle of the night anymore . . . even though the means, the motivation are still in readiness, the machine is there, obviously whirring away. In a vacuum! Rooms full of stuff. Files, files, and more files, hardly ever used. It's the same thing with them, minimum results, believe me. Minimal performance. Minimum results, Kid."

Ali seemed tired, lacking the patience required to spell out, for the umpteenth time, things that were self-evident, things that he'd understood in good time, quite a while ago, obviously.

"And so this drop that overflows a glass that's already been running over for a long time—this drop is not a drop of blood. A simple extra drop, like so many others. Poor Dina, she got scared over nothing. There's no reason to be scared or conscience-stricken. It's not unheard-of, nothing to get hysterical about, believe me. Routine and boredom, as you used to say. Our little devil, boredom. You can get rid of the devil just as well by boring him to death. Because he gets rid of himself, obviously. A sleepy society! Deprived of the epic elements. Unspeakable boredom, that's what you used to say. Our little devil, he swallows everything, screws up everything, falls apart and gets swallowed down himself. No, you mustn't hit him, confront him, provoke him, or he'll rev up and destroy us. But if you simply accept him, you destroy him bit by bit. No acts of heroism, please, that's the rule: nothing epic. Here's our epic poem: hot air. Boredom! How right you were, obviously. Boredom!"

He was definitely on a roll, friend Ali, forced as he was to spout his tiresome truths that even children can figure out these days, figure out and then file away, which is just about all you can do with them.

The park was nearby. Night had fallen. A clear, cool night. The park was silent and empty.

Ali returned with renewed vigor to his initiation course. He'd recovered his composure, and his little exposé was becoming more explicit, more didactic.

Al. I. Stoian even touched once again on that troublesome point, this time with a strange detachment. As though it weren't an event they'd just been discussing, involving people they knew. He spoke of it the way people talk about scandals in the tabloids. As though he were only too familiar with weird occurrences, and they didn't bother him in the least. As though he were utterly used to such things. He spoke as if he were describing to a child how the world works, when the child hasn't even noticed the phenomena in question.

An official tone, an orderly presentation, a logic geared to the education of the ignorant: the appointments to which various people are summoned periodically, the places where such conversations take place.

His listener appeared extremely, exaggeratedly attentive. He listened, didn't listen, seemed to be intercepting something else, another voice, or voices, imperceptible currents, the rustling of air, a subterranean gasp, staccato commands, a frightened moan, somewhere, close by or far away, all around, or just the reverie in which he drifted off, longing to return to his games, his den, a world of his own.

Not in official surroundings, of course . . . continued a voice, God knows where and when. Reports weren't made in offices anymore, they'd given up on that, even though the people who ordered and organized such meetings were officials, obviously, I mean as official as anyone could get . . . The voice gradually imposed itself, its timbre, acquired its own personality . . . Unofficial surroundings, but official agents, wow! Even if the official assignment wasn't legal, well, in this case, definitely illegal, couldn't be more illegal, on the contrary . . . The voice was getting better and better at putting on a nonchalant tone, yes, yes, it was growing more distinctive, a familiar voice, wasn't it, yes, yes.

The apartments? Copies of keys? With the permission of the tenant, obviously, even though, well, I mean, you never know, things can get too complicated for their own good, obviously. Obviously.

"How would they get the keys?" asked Felicia in astonishment. She was ready for bed, that time when her husband would tell her, very sweetly, the most outlandish stories. "You mean that Vasile would have given them permission to . . . You mean they had the keys and they knew when no one would be home or . . . but how . . . and why, how does that fit in, the coat, the overcoat, I mean the trenchcoat, the raincoat, not the overcoat—now you've got me saying things every which way. So it had nothing to do with our visit? Left there a long time ago and . . . she hadn't noticed? Or else it didn't turn up until

the next day, after the dinner party? So she figured it out, or it's precisely that she can't figure it out? And *the others*, *them*, what kind of meetings—conversations, I mean—and why, why wouldn't they use real offices for their interrogations, I mean their meetings, their meetings with *them*, *those people*, the informers, call them whatever you like, their stooges. Aren't they, they're on the official payroll, so they can use the offices. Why not, what do you mean they're not stooges? What are you talking about, they're not exactly their people? Forced into it? How are they forced into it? What, poor bastards, what do you mean, poor miserable souls? You mean that *you*, *you'd* agree to . . . No, no, I'm not talking about Ali and his theories, or Vasile, no, or their wives, no . . . *You*, *you'd* agree to . . . Why other people's apartments, what does that mean? Family atmosphere, domestic environment, how, what, no, no, I don't follow you, family setting, what kind, what mood . . . Excuse me, just talk, what do you mean just talk, an intimate atmosphere—what do you mean, intimate, private, how . . . What is this, increased efficiency . . . How can you say such . . . What does that mean, privacy, what privacy?"

This really isn't the kind of story to tell at bedtime. Too upsetting, and it leads to no end of questions. After a while, the tension inevitably gets to both the narrator and the listener, and, in any case, ordinary daily life provides more than enough worries and fears. There's no need to add to them, so why chase around after terrifying mysteries?

And so the couple decided never, ever, to talk of such matters again. To forget the whole thing, as though it had never happened.

The other couple, the Stoians, hadn't even tried to fathom the enigma, it seems. Wiser, probably. And also, perhaps, indifferent to this kind of transparent mystery, or quite simply more cautious, unwilling to burden their days and nights—especially their nights—with unanswerable questions.

A few months later, however, the inevitable happened. The wife came home in a state of indescribable agitation, which couldn't have been caused by the line at the butcher's, where she'd wasted several hours in the cold and darkness, since she was used to that, after all.

Her mute distress and the way she kept rubbing and rubbing at her glasses seemed to suggest some extraordinary event.

The husband was busy proofreading the text of an article due to appear in the newspaper the following day, and doing so very carefully, because the piece had been more or less dictated to him on the phone by someone from the top floor of power. He raised his woolly black head and looked at his wife in annoyance. And waited, still watching her. The woman smoothed her short hair, glaring at him through her glasses. A sharp, green-eyed stare.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"What?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about . . . I could

feel there was something going on. I felt it, but I didn't want to start asking questions. You never know, I thought, I could be wrong. I felt there'd been . . . that there were still things going on all the time with that business. I was waiting for you to tell me about it. I mean, I wanted to get to the bottom of it, too."

"What? What are you talking about? What's happened now?"

"What's happened? You're asking me what's happened? No, I don't believe this . . . You'd think the poor dear had just been born yesterday! *You*, exactly, *you*, the one who always knows everything, and before everyone else, and knows a lot more than he needs to!"

"I know what? What's going on?"

"The romantic lady, remember her? The one who killed her father, the old man who died of a broken heart when the apple of his eye waltzed off with a bum, a faker, a creep who wound up becoming a great big zero, or maybe Zero the Great? Fancy-schmancy Madame, remember? With her priceless house, her priceless wardrobe, and her priceless way of talking! The statue, right? I saw her! I ran into her! Just now in the street. And I saw what's happened. Only now you have to explain it to me. It's too much of a shock, I can't get over it. I want a clear explanation. Clear, you hear me? Clear, clear, clear!"

She was shouting. Her husband must have known she'd end up bursting into tears and pulling out all the stops. He set down his pile of papers.

"You have to speak clearly first. Tell me exactly what

you're talking about. Because right now I haven't the foggiest idea. Calm down, explain what's upsetting you, tell me what happened."

"Come on, do you think I'm some kind of idiot? Or crazy? I saw her, I told you. I met her! I ran into her on the street, two hours ago. I stopped, if you want to know. We had a conversation. A normal conversation . . . an absolutely normal conversation, even. You know what she told me?"

The husband dropped his mask of indifference. Bored? Relaxed? No, far from it: he was impatient, disturbed, frightened. It would probably have been impossible to describe precisely how he felt.

"You know what Madame told me? The story that's going around all over Bucharest! Everyone's heard it—taxi drivers, soldiers, old people, even children. The tale of the disappearing corpse. The story about the dead woman. You must have heard it a good twenty times."

"I haven't heard any story about any dead woman. I guess that means I'm not so well informed after all," muttered the husband faintly, in a resigned tone.

"Poor sweetheart! As though anyone would believe you anymore! As though anyone would still believe the tiniest word from you, or even a lousy comma . . . And the latest edict, regarding the obligatory burial of deceased persons in the locality where they rendezvoused with the Grim Reaper? You've heard about that, have you?"

The husband remained silent; who could tell what he knew or didn't know?

"From now on, the dead must be buried where they

died, how about that! Sure, right, the poor dear is completely at sea, I'm the one who has to bring him up to date on all this, fine, fine . . . So you don't know the story of the dead woman? It's told hundreds of times a day in cottages, offices, schools, everywhere, but the poor boy hasn't heard even a whisper! An old peasant woman . . . Well, she met Death, scythe and all, here, in Bucharest—not in her village, the way she would have wanted, with her old man by her side, in her old house that she'd lived in since forever. She'd come to visit one of her sons, here, in Bucharest. And the son? He wanted to take her home to the village, where the rest of the family was. To their own village, so she could be buried there. Forbidden! Against the law! The body goes nowhere, neither as is nor in a coffin. For-bid-den, courtesy of take one guess. Not even that, you haven't even got that anymore, the right to die when you feel like it, wherever you feel like it, to rot in peace wherever you want, instead of where Comrade You-know-who says."

"Ioana, if you could . . . Wouldn't it be better if you calmed down, tried to get a grip on yourself, you're talking wild, not watching what you say . . ."

"Not watching what I say? What, you want to see me die of fear right here in my own home? So what, what difference does it make? What do I care if they hear everything I say, what do I care if the walls have ears, fuck it, how about that, I really don't give a frigging damn! The son wrapped his mother's body in a rug. One of those big rugs, made a big, fat roll. And he put it on the roof rack of his car. He wanted to drive the rug to his mother's



house, so the old woman could be buried properly, with her family. He took along a friend from the office where he worked, and they went up north, to the other end of the country. They stopped along the way to eat, or sleep, whatever. So they entered a restaurant, and in the meantime, someone stole their rug! Someone stole the rug tied to the car! A huge rug, really beautiful and everything. They stole the rug, with the body wrapped up in it. That's it . . . You never know what's going to happen . . . So there you have it, that's the latest hot rumor going all over town. And . . . and . . . Madame! A normal conversation . . . perfectly normal. Everything was quite normal, utterly normal. The same short, well-thought-out sentences, lapidary treasures. Superb diction, like in the theater. The same distance . . . that ultra-correct, conventional stiffness which humiliates you and drives you out of your mind. The same, the same, exactly the way I've always known her. Translating that story into stiff academic prose. That story, from her lips! A high-level lecture . . . from her prissy, aristocratic mouth."

The husband stared at the floor, directing a heavy black look at the red flower in the precise center of the rug.

Ioana was pacing up and down the room; she stopped, waited, returned to the fray.

"Everything looked perfect. Expertly made-up, as always. Ultra-soignée, aloof, polite, just as we've always known her. Not a thing had changed. Except that raincoat . . . that's all. Italian high heels, impeccable hairdo, freshly manicured nails. Freshly manicured, even that revolting thumb of hers. Hairdo, nails, silk scarf. Makeup . . .

lipstick, mascara, eyebrow pencil. The perfect mask, Cleopatra, Queen Nefertiti, absolutely. This posture, conversation, everything flawless, as before. Except for the raincoat . . . A long one, a man's raincoat. That trenchcoat!"

Ali studied the carpet; Ioana marched back and forth, extremely upset. She stopped, looked at her husband furiously, suspiciously—sometimes suspiciously, sometimes as though she were about to explode, ready to release all of her pent-up anger.

"The trenchcoat! You know what kind of raincoat they were wearing? Perhaps not . . . They were wearing the same kind. The same kind, both of them! The cheapest kind, you know, the one you see in all the stores, the one hardly anyone buys. Those big, man's, faded-looking raincoats. A sort of cotton duck that used to be real material and used to have who knows what real color. Now it's the color of wind, fog, our bleached-out boredom. Big, long, a raincoat from a long-dead army, no shape, no style, no color. The same, you understand? The same raincoat, both of them! You'd have thought they'd escaped together from a loony bin, from that camp years ago, or from the moon, or from the circus. The same trenchcoat, you hear, the same! I'm mistaken? I'm seeing things, I'm crazy? Nightmares, visions, sure, I'm exhausted, hysterical, right? Right? Right . . . So, tell me, tell me where, where does madness come from, like that, all of a sudden? From apathy, from cowardice, from fatigue and passive complicity and normality, that abnormal, vegetative, pathological, stifling normality that's strangling us all? Just like

that, all at once, from that sort of tepid sludge we put up with? Just like that, in the middle of the jokes and the rumors and the gossip and the harangues?"

Then, a rustling in the air, perhaps, trailed by the shadow of a long, thin, invisible snake. But no one heard a thing. The woman took a deep breath and fell silent. Her voice had sunk gradually lower, finishing in a sort of suffocated helplessness.

"So now you understand. And now I would like to understand, too."

The man didn't speak. His gloomy face had probably grown even gloomier. The woman watched him, waiting. Those little green eyes behind the thick lenses . . . and the pale, ever paler face, and the short hair, quivering with each nervous toss of her head.

"You must also know, I'm sure, who was with her . . . Perhaps you could explain that to me as well, while you're at it."

Her husband, naturally, kept his eyes fixed on the red spot in the carpet.

"Aha, you know that, too. So there's an explanation for everything . . . You knew that as well, of course. And you never said a word to me. You should have seen me, I was thunderstruck, petrified. Petrified, I mean it. Just seeing her, first of all. You never know . . . was it her, or wasn't it? I couldn't tell anymore. And then our conversation, seemingly so natural, with her usual tics, her stilted phrasing. Aloof, imperial. Talking of this and that . . . the current gossip . . . the latest story, the body hidden in the stolen rug . . . as if everything were fine, as if her elaborate

phrasing were perfectly suited to the story—as if she'd always been interested in such things and used to talk about them all the time! I tried not to see that raincoat of hers, way too big for her, she was swimming in it, so slender and elegant, the way she is. And just then, whom do I see coming out of the cigar store on the corner? The Learned One! The Researcher! I didn't understand yet, I was going to wave, call to him. For all I knew, he hadn't seen me . . . but the Learned One was heading, in fact, very calmly, straight for us. Here the Guileless One came up to me and asked—well, what do you think he asked me? How are you! That's what he asked me, how are you! . . . That's what that Simpleton asked me. Never said a word to her, the other one. I was openmouthed, rooted to the spot, I didn't know whether I was coming or going, I was completely at a loss."

Ioana Stoian couldn't control herself any longer. She fled to the kitchen, from which came confused noises, the sound of a chair being knocked over perhaps, and the clank of silverware, and then she took refuge in the bathroom. She stayed quite a while in the bathroom. Finally, she reappeared, rubbing her forehead with her right hand, holding a glass of water in her left. She drank it all in a single draught and went on holding the empty glass.

"Suddenly I realized that they were actually . . . together. He'd gone off to buy cigarettes, and she, when I first spotted her, she'd been waiting there alone, standing listlessly on the sidewalk. That strange apparition . . . out of nowhere, in front of me."

Alexandru I. Stoian remained silent. He was no longer

looking at the carpet. He was no longer looking at anything.

"So he asked me, politely, how I was, and then he gently took her arm. He said goodbye to me and . . . they left. It's just too much for one day! After hours and hours of pushing and shoving on line, in the noise and cold and dirt, I was feeling faint and I'd finally managed to leave triumphantly with that disgusting package of rancid sausage in my hand. I run into her, and a few moments later . . . the Martian lands, right in front of us. You would've sworn they were from the same family, or else husband and wife, or lovers, or missionaries, or cellmates, escaped from the same prison or asylum or freak show. The two of us, and then him . . . The Child! The Learned One! the Researcher! There was some kind of complicity, I don't know . . . something strange. I was stunned, confounded. And those raincoats! The same, the same . . . I was going mad. As though they'd arrived from another galaxy, or were on their way there . . . I don't know, who knows, I give up."

Alexandru I. Stoian remained silent. He neither looked at nor saw anything, but he heard everything, every word, even if he'd lost the power of speech, and he'd lost that a good while ago.

"A nightmare! Then I stood around for an hour at the bus stop. Hundreds of people with their string shopping bags, numb, frazzled, frustrated, ready to scratch one another's eyes out. I was thrust into the bus, there's no other way of putting it, swept along by the crowd. I couldn't

see a thing anymore, squeezed in like that. So there I was, in the bus, squashed by all those sweaty bodies. A nightmare. Paralyzed, held there stiff as a stick, pitching from side to side whenever that whole heavy mass of tired bodies swung right or left each time we took a curve. But I couldn't feel a thing, I just couldn't feel a single thing anymore. I was still back there, in fact, on the sidewalk, in front of the butcher shop, between the two Martians. All I could see was the both of them. I couldn't get over it . . . A nightmare."

"Hmm, yes . . ." Alexandru I. Stoian seemed to mumble, after another long pause.

"And . . . that . . . raincoat? What, what the . . . what the hell is it with that raincoat?" burst out Ioana Stoian in renewed fury.

"Well . . . it was left at their house. You see . . . it would have . . . it would have disappeared. It would have disappeared, obviously, eventually, just the way it turned up. The same way, just like that, the way . . . it showed up. You see . . . the same person, or someone else, or . . . anyway, it would have gone, it would have been picked up."

"What? What, the same person or someone else, what is this? No, really, this is too much. Too much! No way! Why, since it would have disappeared in any case . . . why . . . no, who should have picked it up and why wasn't it picked up, and so then how . . . no, it's too much!"

"Hmm, yes . . . It would have disappeared, except that there was this problem. Her illness, I mean, the break-

down. The trenchcoat . . . Well, you saw. That's why it couldn't be picked up again. It turned into something else. Anthropomorphized, as they say."

"As who says? Who, why, what anthro, what morpho, you've got me talking nonsense again, so, what does that mean, now we're theorizing here, is that what we're doing? Anthro, phormo, morpho, that's it, that's the problem? You're trying to make me think you're insane, and that I'm insane too, everyone, we're all insane? You mean, and . . . and, and . . . the husband, I mean? What's he doing, this Mr. Fixit? Unless he doesn't even know what's going on . . . Of course, the husbands are always the last to know."

"No, it's not what you think. The poor guy knows, he knows everything, he told me all about it. The other one—the Researcher, whatever you call him—has been very touched by what's happened . . ."

"Touched?" shouted the madwoman to the madman. "Touched, that's the word? He's been touched by Comrade Vasile's distress, that's what you're saying? Who's touched in the head here, who? Me, you, all of us, who? You mean, anyone, anything, is that what you mean?"

The lunatic turned sharply on her heel, speechless with anger, and stopped in precisely the right spot to glare with phosphorescent, venomous, suspicious green eyes at the lunatic husband gaping in astonishment.

"Anyone, anything, that's it, that's the explanation? Anyone can do anything, feel anything, any time, toward anyone, that's the idea? Who, the Child, or whatever you call him? The prize pupil, the distinguished student who

considered his classmate Vasile a prize moron? . . . The Brat, who was reading Marx and Rimbaud at thirteen while the other one, the dunce, was kicking a ball around with the neighborhood kids? And the mathematics, the physics, the fancy degrees? The crisis, the downfall? And—and his book, and its brief, bizarre period of marginal success? He's marginal, that's what he is, the Simpleton, off on the sidelines, with himself, with others, far from the crap, the general masquerade—isolated, peripheral, on the fringe, while the class jerk rises higher and higher, piling up the privileges while he's got the chance, for a rainy day, then whoa, all of a sudden, the Learned One is touched by suffering, he's touched by sin and mystery and the mud little piggies have to wallow in? Touched by the snobbery of *parvenus* who're dying to have them—the losers, the fringe-dwellers, the outcasts—at their table, to protect them and show them that their hosts are human beings, you see, poor, polite, hospitable, educated little piggies, full of fun and good manners, even liberal piggy-wiggies, you'd never know they were perfectly capable of kissing the devil's ass any old time at all, ready for any shit and all possible lies and treachery and cruelty and, and, and . . . touched by that? You mean, anything, anyone, we're all alike, no exceptions, that's it, that's the theory you're hiding behind? In the slender hope of getting out of this, if everything and everyone's the same so that nothing matters?"

"I said he was touched by what's happened, not sympathetic to Basil, I didn't say that. But you're really not listening anymore. You're busy having your tantrum."

"By what's happened, that's it, exactly! That's just what I said, the husband's the very last to know."

"It's not what you think," Al. I. Stoian repeated softly. "It seems she's not well. You never know, with these episodes . . . with this kind of illness. It's a complicated situation. Sometimes she looks sick, sometimes she seems normal . . . It's not as simple as all that. You never can tell, these illnesses are tricky. He was calling up day after day to see how she was doing, and then they started discussing the problem. On the phone first, and then they got together to talk about it. They meet regularly. They seem to help her, these meetings. What do you want, after all . . . Afterward, she comes home calm and relaxed, that's what Bazil told me. She comes home quite serene, as though nothing were wrong."

"And him, him . . . old flabby . . . the Kid . . . What am I getting into? Shit, he couldn't stomach her. He said the most disgusting things about her, he couldn't bear the sight of her. And suddenly, wham! There's something wrong here! What the hell has gotten into him?"

"Why are you getting so worked up? It's an act of great kindness, that's what it is! And great patience, obviously. It can't be much fun, as you can imagine. He has to spend a lot of time going on all those walks. He's being very understanding and attentive, if you want to know . . . It's an admirable thing for him to do."

"Hey! No, now, really, I'm going batty! Patient, attentive, admirable! You think I'm a half-wit or a nut case. That's it, you must think I'm either retarded or hysterical . . . That's why you never told me a thing about what

happened and what's still going on. An admirable thing to do, right, listen to him . . . There's something else, something else, I'm sure of it. I just can't see the Little Mouse leaving his cage full of books to play lady-in-waiting out of pure charity. And the trenchcoat, I mean the raincoats . . . What is this farce, they're playing ghosts, or what? No, no, there's something going on, something!" screamed Ioana Stoian, pale and haggard. "There's something going on! There's always something under the surface, obviously. Obviously! Nothing is what it seems, nothing or no one, not even your own husband, no one! Anyone can become anything! Anyone, anytime, anything? . . . Come on, answer. Charity? Don't be ridiculous! Research, yes . . . that's the best-case scenario. A subject for study, yes, I can see that, obviously. A kind of experiment . . . scientific research, a project, if you like, choose your own term. An exercise in pure research, an extra experiment, an ex, okay? And that's the best possible interpretation! He can't stand her, I'm sure of it," shouted Ioana Stoian, holding her arms out in front of her as though to ward off any reply contemplated by her husband, Alexandru I. Stoian.

She no longer needed to pause to catch her breath, no, she couldn't bear any interruption now—the flood was unstoppable.

"He can't stand her, he never could stand her! Even now, he can't stand her, I'm certain of it, absolutely certain! What good does it do to wear a raincoat like that! Unless it was his idea to have her wear a raincoat just like the other one? Simulation, right? Setting up an experiment? Conditions

for study and research, that's what the Guileless One is after, that Simpleton, that ex, that hypocrite! Who's he trying to put one over on? Me? You, perhaps . . . all of us. Himself? . . . What's he trying to prove? Anytime, anyone, that's it? That's the point? Who knows . . . Wouldn't surprise me, no, no, not anymore, obviously. He wants to observe, right, to probe around under the surface, get past appearances! Appearances . . . and then what? Appearances, those trenchcoats of theirs, appearances, come on! Scientific cynicism, yes, and that's the nicest way of putting it. I'm telling you, the nicest way. There could be something behind it, who knows, something else entirely . . ."

There were, in fact, many hypotheses. The two also discussed them, the old friends from childhood, the war generation. Not just the war generation, a new term had to be found that applies more accurately to that which was and that which followed.

Yes, they also pondered the same possibilities during their long weekly walks. They had animated, passionate discussions beneath the stony, inscrutable sky. They reconsidered the question, each time from a new angle. And this was what brightened up the sick woman, it seems, and steadied her nerves. She'd take an intense interest in their talks. About her life, their lives, the lives of their friends, their acquaintances, the lives of all the Martians they passed on the street or remembered from the past.

She seemed finally free, liberated. An absolute, cosmic,

intangible assurance. A focused, steady voice, and a happy laugh, incognito.

Time was as though sharpened, glassy, feverish, glinting with sarcasm. A sarcastic, happy, broken laugh, with cutting black shards.

The time of absence suddenly heard as sound. Sharpened, shattered. A glassy, guileless, ancient laugh.