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# W h e n E v e W a s N a k e d

Stories of a Life's Journey

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*Life...is really always a tragedy,  
but gone through in detail,  
it has the character of a comedy.*

—Arthur Schopenhauer

*For Marie*

We were sitting in a booth at the Boulevard Café when we heard it. It came from down at street level, outside the window, desperate and determined and defiant. "Long live President Beneš!" Freddy got up to look out the window. We saw him gape at what he saw. Then he absentmindedly raised a hand and waved down toward the people on the street.

"What's up?" asked Doddy.

"Students," said Freddy, still staring out the window. "Students or something. They have a flag and a picture of Masaryk."

We stood up and looked out the window too. A modest crowd was moving up Wenceslas Square, two or three hundred young guys and girls, led by a pale, lanky fellow carrying a flag and looking dead serious. The ones behind him carried a big picture of President Masaryk that must have been stashed away since their party congress. Czech Socialists, obviously.

"Look! There's Tom," said Doddy.

"Where?" I asked.

"Over there. See the picture they're carrying? A little ways behind them."

I was looking, but I couldn't find him.

"See? Right beside him, that's Věra. See?"

Then I spied them. Tom, hatless with a multicoloured scarf around his neck, and Věra, smoking a cigarette. Clearly, she was agitated. I thought about how the papers tomorrow would write about it as a provocation by rich kids. Stupid. This wasn't the way to do it. They should have dressed down. Watching the demonstrators, I was sick at the thought of how they were fuelling the propaganda. Sure. Every other guy was wearing shoes with thick rubber soles. And the girls were smoking. Sure. Rich kids, golden youth, zoot-suiters, that's what they'd say, and leave it at that, because naturally, zoot-suiters couldn't possibly have patriotic feelings and stuff. Just plain stupid.

"How did they get involved there?" I asked.

"Why, sure, Tom was always an avid Czech Socialist."

"I never knew that."

"Oh, yeah. And Věra's even worse, I think."

"I thought they weren't political."

"No way." Freddy fell silent and stared out the window. I could tell he was rooting for them. Me, I took a rather cool view of the whole thing, but I knew how Freddy was probably feeling. A sense of solidarity, delight at not being alone, and a kind of defiant joy at showing no fear. I wasn't moved, though. I wasn't a hundred percent on either side. In the first place, I had my doubts about which side was right, and then, I viewed it all sort of like some great big drama. Theatre. What I felt was a perverse kind of pleasure. Pleasure that something was going on. That something was happening again, and that I was a part of it. Watching the streets fill up, people demonstrate, the tension escalate, newspapers publish special editions, the cops brandish their bayonets, that was for me. I hadn't felt so good, so excited, since the war ended. Yes, it was almost like during the war again. Inhumane or not, this was certainly better than their stupid, fusty, muffled peace.

"Damn," said Freddy. "Let's go. Come on, let's go march with them!"

"Don't be a dope," said Doddy. "Be glad you're not involved."

Freddy kept staring out the window, chewing on his lower lip. Then he said, "Nuts. Let's go. I'm going. Come on."

"Listen to me, don't be an idiot, man. When the shooting starts, then you'll—"

"So? Let 'em shoot. Just let 'em try it and they'll see!"

"The hell they'll see," said Doddy. "Sit down, man, and be glad we're up here, out of the way."

I was having fun watching them. Freddy got pretty worked up where politics were concerned. I'll never to my dying day forget how he punched some cop in the nose during the Czech Socialist Party congress. That's just what he was like. And as for Communists, he was always ready to kill them on the spot.

"You jerk," he said to Doddy, "what do you think will happen if everybody just sits on their duff?"

"Not a damn thing."

"Yeah. Because everything will be steamrolled by the Communists."

"You can't be any help to that dumb party of yours."

"Maybe not. But if everyone—"

"Then everyone will shit their pants in unison. Man, what can you do in the face of machine guns?"

"They'd never dare."

"They'd dare all right. You saw them, didn't you? Those faces of theirs?"

Doddy was right about that. That afternoon I had noticed them too, the cops strolling by twos up and down the square, submachine guns strapped across their chests. From the look on their faces, you could tell how they were getting off on sauntering among the crowd, and seeing how scared of them folks were.

Freddy set his jaw and bit his lip again. Outside the window, they were chanting. "No matter what they try to tell us, we're still Masaryk's girls and fellas!" As the chanting began to fade, I stood up and got a last glimpse of the flag swaying down at the foot of the square. People were standing around on the sidewalks, bewildered. Some, a very few, waved and shouted "Go for it!" but most

of them just stared, stunned or blank, but clearly supportive. Supportive, but scared. I could tell they were scared, and that the only way it could end was badly. There was no movement in the crowd. In fact, it wasn't a crowd. They were still nothing but individuals, who would have liked to do something, but needed to protect themselves.

"Come on outside," I said.

Doddy gave me a look. "You want to get into it too?"

"Nope. I just want to go out in the streets and take a look."

"So, let's go," said Freddy quickly and got to his feet.

"Guys, let's not," said Doddy.

"Come on," I said. "It's not as if we're going to do anything."

"Leave him be if he's chicken, the jerk," said Freddy.

"You moron," said Doddy contemptuously, rising. "It's all the same to me, but I'm telling you right now, I'm not getting involved in anything. If you're hell bent on getting mixed up in it, fine, go ahead. It's your funeral."

"Let's go then," Freddy said. "Waiter!" he called out. The waiter scurried over as if nothing were happening and we paid. Doddy bought a pack of cigarettes from him, cool and calm. He certainly looked calmer than Freddy, and much older. As for me, I couldn't wait to be out there.

Downstairs, we emerged in the passageway. It was full of people, and freezing cold. Framed by the dark of the passage, Wenceslas Square looked bright with its snow and slush. Then we were outside.

"Down that way," said Freddy. I knew why. That was where the procession had gone. Of course. We turned down that way. The square was much more crowded than usual. It was a clear, crisp day, and people were moving in two thick streams, slowly and expectantly. A unit of cops burst out of the Bata passageway. We stopped to let them go by. I looked for the expressions on their faces. Most of them were older guys with beer bellies, obviously ill at ease. They were led by a loud-mouthed young cop who was moving so fast that most of them could hardly keep up. He car-

ried a submachine gun under his arm, trying to look important and military. He was really getting off on his role as a cop. I wondered whether his feelings were any different from those of the Nazi Schutzpolizei in November of '39, when they were clearing the square here.<sup>3</sup> Probably not. The old guys in the police uniforms were sweating, struggling to maintain a foothold on the slippery pavement. They had no submachine guns, just ordinary rifles over their shoulders.

Freddy said what I was thinking. "So? You think these fellows would start something?"

"Those must be the unreliable ones. Besides, they're just being transferred someplace. Nobody would send them after you."

"Go on, most of them are like that."

"What are you, blind or something?"

"Well, the young ones would think better of it too."

"You really believe they think at all?" asked Doddy sarcastically. "Come on, they just follow orders. No different from the Krauts."

Freddy was silent.

"They're indoctrinated," Doddy continued. "Like the Nazis laid their propaganda even on little kids in youth clubs. As far as I'm concerned, those jerks are no different from the SS. Don't anybody tell me that only the Germans were swine. There are swine like them in every nation."

Doddy was on a roll. When he was on a roll, he was really good. All of a sudden he wasn't afraid of anything. That's him. Won't go yelling with a crowd, but on his own, he would say it all, and loud enough for everyone around to hear. He used to do that during the war too. Two days after Heydrich croaked, he started shooting off his mouth on Wenceslas Square about boss Frank<sup>4</sup> and about German brutalities, till all of us who were there with him got scared and split. But nothing ever happened to him. He was lucky.

"When is Beneš going to make his speech?" I asked, to shut him up.

"He's not," said Doddy tersely.

"How come?" Freddy goaded him.

"Come on. They'll never let him on the air. Like that Social Democrat minister, Majer."

"You're nuts. They have to let Beneš go on, of all people."

"Just wait and see."

"They've got to let him on, it'd be an international scandal if they didn't."

"What?"

"What, what?"

"What was that?" Doddy asked disagreeably.

"What?"

"What did you say? An international scandal?" he went on, sarcastically.

"Sure."

"You think the Commies give a shit about any international scandal? If you do, man, then you're pretty naive."

Freddy turned red. "I'm telling you they'll have to let Beneš go on the air, because he has the respect of the whole nation. Even the Communists."

"You poor sap," said Doddy in a condescending tone. "Is that what they taught you in those ideology classes of yours?"

"Well, so you imagine that they won't let Beneš go on the air?"

"And so you think they will? Man, when are you going to figure out that the Commies have their agenda and that they don't give a damn about how they get there, as long as they get there. Or do you believe them now when they make like patriots?"

Freddy did not reply.

"Do you think they care about any international scandal?" Doddy repeated, "or about any respect that Beneš has? Man, it's just a few guys making this happen, the ones on top, they say the word and the factory militia and the cops wave their bayonets and then the mob jumps up and down and yells whatever they're told. Just look around and see how well it's working for them."

"What's working for them?" demanded Freddy.

"Everything. Just look around. The radio dances to their tune,

people demonstrate whenever they're told, factories send out letters of protest."

"Well, one of these days it'll stop working for them!"

"When? And why should it?" Doddy persisted. His piercing eyes narrowed into slits and he leaned over toward Freddy. His expression was downright diabolical. Damn, I don't know if I've ever seen anyone look quite that demonic. He was the embodiment of icy reason, and I knew what he was saying was true, but I didn't care about it as much as he did. And besides, I wouldn't want to rob Freddy of his illusions. That must be the main difference between Doddy and me. I didn't really care what happened or didn't happen for the Communists, whereas Doddy did. I knew how much he cared. But he was awfully hard on himself. Or else maybe he took some perverse pleasure in it. I don't know. Either way, he spoke coldly, clearly, and explicitly.

"It'll never stop working for them, man. Can't you see it's a lost cause?"

"Not yet it's not," Freddy broke in, but Doddy paid no attention and kept right on talking.

"A lost cause! The Commies have it all in their back pockets. This is just an episode in a tragedy for all of Eastern Europe. In that context, we, or some Czech socialist party, are completely irrelevant. There's only one thing that could conceivably get us out of this mess."

"What's that?"

With a cynical smile, Doddy leaned even closer to Freddy. I leaned over too, so I could hear. Sure, I knew what he was going to say, but I wanted to hear him say it. It felt good, hearing him say it.

"Nothing but war," said Doddy, straightening up. It was interesting to watch Freddy's reaction. He wanted to argue, but he suddenly realized that Doddy was right. And yet, war—Freddy had that fundamental aversion to war. That was what made what was happening different from what had happened in '39. Back then, that aversion didn't exist. Nobody had it. Now it was an underlying component to everyone's uneasiness. True, people talked like

Doddy, that it's all the same, the methods and the cops and all, but they could tell it wasn't the same. The thought of war terrified them. Because this probably wouldn't just be an ordinary war like against the Germans. Me, I didn't care, though. I knew how they felt, but I didn't care. For me, war was something else. I knew about the killing and stuff. But to me, it was different. That's why a passionate street crowd like that made me feel good.

All of a sudden I spied Petr rushing up the square. His overcoat was unbuttoned and he was in a hurry, "Hey, Pete!" I called.

He stopped and looked around with near-sighted eyes behind little spectacles.

"What's your rush?"

"Oh, hi!" He seemed pleased to see us.

"Hi. What's your hurry?"

He stepped over to us and said excitedly, "I'm on my way from the Party secretariat. The police are shaking it down."

"What?" asked Freddy.

"They're doing a shakedown at the secretariat. Three vanloads of cops and a heavy machine gun."

Freddy was visibly upset. "And isn't anybody doing anything about it?"

Petr shrugged his shoulders.

"Justice isn't bestowed, justice is taken," quoted Doddy stonily. "*Macht geht vor Recht*. Might before right."

"Yeah, that's how it is," nodded Petr sadly.

"Just like under the Germans."

"Well?" Doddy turned to Freddy. "Well? Are they going to let Beneš on the air?"

I felt sorry for Freddy. He stood there, red-faced and defensive. Then he said, "Let's go over there. Come on, guys."

"Yes, well, I'll say goodbye, I'm in a hurry," said Petr.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Home. My old lady worries about me."

"Well then, go ahead," I said, to be rid of him. I was grateful to him for the news, but now I wanted to be off myself. I wanted to

see that heavy machine gun. God, how I wanted to see that gun. It's odd, but at that moment I really couldn't think of anything else.

"Okay, I'm off. So long," said Petr.

"So long," we said and started out across the square. At its foot an unarmed cop was directing traffic. It was weird. As we walked along Příkopy Avenue, I noticed that the crowd was getting denser. A yellow glow spilled out through the open door to Holy Cross. I glanced in as we walked past. I saw a priest, white and gold in the radiance before the altar, and I heard the murmur of prayer. It seemed serene, but I knew that the people in there were anything but serene. Except maybe the priest. I always thought that a priest has to maintain his serenity, no matter what. That's part of being a priest. I never believed in God, at least not in the Church's God, but somehow I was convinced that if I were a priest, I'd be serene all the time. That somehow I'd have nothing to lose, or I'd feel safe because I'd be sure of heaven. I'd just be serene. But now I wasn't. The excitement of the mob was gradually soaking in.

"Wow," I said, "it's getting crowded."

"Guys," said Doddy, "wait. Don't rush into anything."

"Well, you stay here if you're scared," said Freddy. "Let's go," he turned to me.

I knew Doddy wasn't scared. With him, it was more like an allergy. An allergy to the mob. Being in the middle of it and being dragged along with it, and crowded in a passageway with it and ultimately tossed into a paddy wagon with it.

I halted. "Aw, come on, Doddy. We'll be careful."

"No, guys, I'm not going there. It's dumb and besides, it's pointless."

"No, c'mon. I'm telling you, all we're going to do is take a look, and then we'll leave."

"And the cops will pounce and you'll just happen to get picked up and you'll be in all kinds of trouble. I know."

"Leave him be," said Freddy.

"Seriously, Doddy. We'll just take a look and see if there really is a big gun there and take right off." For me, it was really only a

matter of the gun. Or mainly a matter of the gun. As for taking off right away, though, I wasn't entirely certain about that.

"Yeah, and as soon as you set eyes on the gun, you'll freeze. No, you guys, seriously, it's pointless."

"Leave him be," repeated Freddy impatiently and grabbed my arm. I could tell he was all fired up with the tension.

"You're serious, you're not coming?"

"No, I'm not." Doddy shook his head, and suddenly he wasn't the least bit cynical. Suddenly he seemed lonesome and withdrawn. "Don't hold it against me, guys, but I'm really not coming," he said.

"But listen," I said, "when will I see you?"

"Stop by at our place tomorrow. I'll be home all morning."

"All right. Well, so long."

"Bye."

"Bye," said Freddy, pulling me into the thickening crowd. I just caught a glimpse of Doddy turning and starting back. The belt on the back of his trench coat hung loose and a bit of yellow scarf was sticking out of his collar. All of a sudden, he was a sad and tragic figure. All of a sudden, the whole mob was tragic. From where we stood by the Živnobanka, the Communist Party secretariat building loomed tall and white, embellished with red flags and the red neon star on the roof. It was lit, even in broad daylight. The mob was silhouetted against the white of the snow and the red star shone brightly against the dark snow clouds in the sky. The loudspeakers were blaring some Russian march or other.

Freddy said, "Come on, we have to get over by our own secretariat," and he began to push his way through. I followed behind him through a relatively silent crowd, toward the sound of yelling from further up the square. As we approached, from time to time we could discern individual words, voices chanting "Down with totalitarianism!" and "Long live President Beneš!" and "Long live Mayor Zenkl!" But it was all pretty chaotic. We pushed through to the number 5 tram stop. At first all I could see was the grey front wall of St. Joseph's, because I couldn't turn around in the crush.

Through the door I saw St. Jude with his neon halo, and a bunch of people in front of him praying. It occurred to me that he was the patron saint of lost causes, and how apt it was, since this was truly a lost cause. The crowd resumed chanting "Down with totalitarianism!" Baloney, I said to myself, let's not get mystical. But I knew it was a lost cause. The round windows of St. Joseph's shone with a yellow light. Behind them I pictured pew upon pew of kneeling figures, dark in front of the radiant altar, repeating after the priest their eternal and monotonous "*Ora pro nobis. Intercede for us.*" Some of the ritual phrases appealed to me. Father in Heaven, God the Redeemer, Son of God, Holy Trinity, One God. It was all kind of entrancing. Sort of a good spell. It filled a person with certainty and stuff, but that soon vanished and out here it was all too clear just what was what. I finally managed to turn around and face the front of the Czech Socialist Party secretariat. Four flags hung limp, and under the balcony were loudspeakers. The balcony was empty and the loudspeakers silent. The crowd stood there, facing the secretariat. Beneath the balcony, a heavy gun loomed over the hats and caps, beautiful, dangerous, with a matte gleam to it, the wheeled cart holding it out of sight, just the gun towering above the crowd, aiming straight into it, and behind it stood two cops dressed in camouflage-mottled sheepskin-lined overcoats, the ones Nazi paratroopers used to wear, booty from the war. It was an amazing sight. I felt a wave of utter bliss. This was it. Soldiers with submachine guns and an angry mob and excitement and everything out of the ordinary. Total bliss. Nobody was going to classes, out in the streets all day long, nothing commonplace. Everything abnormal. A strained situation. And exhilarating. Stinking of war. I loved it. I felt great.

"Shame!" yelled a fat man standing beside me. "Boo! Shame! Boo!"

"Boo!" echoed Freddy. His reedy voice sounded silly against the fat guy's bass.

"Fascists! Murderers!" the fat guy hollered. "Down with the totalitarians!"

"Long live Beneš!" Freddy chimed in.

"Long live Beneš! Long live Zenkl! Down with totalitarianism!" exclaimed the fat fellow. The cops by the gun sat silent and immobile. The sky over the secretariat was growing dark. Dusk was falling. In the twilight, the crowd was starting to look menacing.

Somewhere up ahead, a man emerged above the heads in the crowd. He must have been lifted onto somebody's shoulders. The crowd quieted down. "Brothers," sounded his muted voice—strangely muted, considering how near it was, "Brothers, take heart! We won't be terrorized! Long live President Beneš! Long live liberty!"

"Up and at 'em!" hollered the fat guy beside me. I was fascinated. I could tell something was about to happen. I couldn't wait. We were in the middle of it and it was great. I felt the mob move. The yelling rose in discontinuous waves of sound. I couldn't tell who was shouting. All I knew was that the crowd was in motion. I could picture myself inside the secretariat. And an entirely new situation. How the *New York Herald* would run a headline about it tomorrow. Mr. Seymour Friedin of the *Herald* was surely watching from somewhere. Maybe from nearby, right there by the secretariat. Violence in Prague. Shots Fired in Czech Capital. Czech Socialists Tangle with Police. Police Go Over to Mob. I could just picture it. I really got into it. Reds Grab for Power in Prague. I looked back to the cops over by the gun, still cold and unmoving as the crowd up front stopped short. From behind, though, the pressure didn't let up. There were shouts and exclamations. Then the shouting died down. More exclamations. All of a sudden, the crowd shifted backward. And then forward again. Then it seemed to move in several streams. Pushing and shoving. Someone stepped on my foot. A little space loosened up right ahead of me. I saw a man with arms outstretched to protect his body, furiously ploughing into others. Somewhere a woman screeched. One fellow fell and tried to get up, but then the space filled up with people again and I never saw whether he made it or not. I knew what was happening. Somewhere the police had charged into the

crowd. An elbow rammed into my ribs. I spun around and felt my arm connect with somebody's jaw. It was fabulous. Then more of that awful, overwhelming, almost intolerable pressure as the mob behind me was halted against the wall of the church. I tried to take a deep breath, and then the pressure eased up. And then again. It pushed me up against a girl, pleasantly warm. I could feel her warmth through my overcoat. From behind, she looked pretty. I deliberately buried my face in her hair, and it smelled nice. I tried to get a look at her face. No way. And then the crowd swirled her out of sight. But that was all right. It was neat that I'd been pushed up against her, but all this was fine too. The crowd rolled back and forth on the square, the shouting and screaming sounding mostly female. I forced my way back to the church wall. Suddenly the crowd started to thin out. I stood with my back against the façade of St. Joseph's. The crowd had diminished from a crushing mass to a scattered throng. I watched as people retreated, ranting and protesting. Now and then someone would look around, shake a fist, stop, a few would step forward and then quickly back up again. And then I saw a line of cops in their camouflage-coloured SS overcoats moving in a wide arc across the square to the secretariat. The area behind them was deserted, only hats and caps scattered on the greyish slushy snow. They advanced slowly, step by step, leading with submachine guns and bayonets, and as they moved forward the crowd fell back, taunting and cursing them in the deepening dusk. The cops made slow, nervous headway, narrowing the gap between themselves and the mob. It was a spellbinding sight. I looked around, but of course, Freddy was nowhere in sight. I pressed my back against the wall. I felt splendid. I felt alive, and alive when it felt good to be alive. I knew what Mr. Friedin was going to write. Police with Bayonets Attack Crowds in Prague Streets. He'd write it splendidly. And I'd be part of it too. I was feeling something. Just like the last time, three years earlier, as the war was ending. Exactly the same. When the soldiers fanned out that day and advanced from the theatre, clutching hand grenades, with rifles at the

ready, followed by their officers with handguns drawn, and the crowd backing down. The selfsame feeling I pressed back against the wall. A splendid feeling I pressed against the wall and waited. I watched the line move toward me. As they came nearer to the wall, they pulled closer together; two of them with submachine guns and one with a mounted bayonet were facing me. They came closer. I stared into their faces. They were tense and nervous. Only one of the two submachine gunners had a bit of a smile on his face. He was the one. He was the real beast. The kind Doddy talked about. He was actually smiling. In fact, I realized I was smiling too. But that was different. Entirely, totally different. But I was indeed smiling. And waiting. They kept coming, and the guy with the submachine gun spied me. He quit smiling. His face stiffened. I knew what he wanted to do. I was enjoying it. But for some reason, I didn't feel like getting out of the way, somehow. He looked like a storm trooper. Literally, like a member of the SS. "Get moving, now!" he barked at me, gesturing with his gun barrel. I could see his eyes, cruel and focused on mine. There was no hatred in them, no embarrassment. Just cruelty. He was enjoying it. I could tell. I didn't budge.

"Are you deaf?" he hollered. He was getting really close to me. Slowly, I pulled away from the wall, staring at him with as much contempt as I could muster.

"You! Make faces at me, will you!" he bellowed, leaping toward me. He tried to grab my collar with his left hand. I spun away from him, my arm jerked up and my elbow caught him in the face. Something crunched in his nose. The cop gave a roar. It felt exactly like under the Germans during the war. From the corner of my eye, I saw the other two lunge toward me, but by then I was rounding the corner, toward the entrance to St. Thaddeus. The saint's purple halo flashed past my eyes. I pushed a few people aside and slipped inside the sanctuary. I stopped, wondering if they would follow me inside. But they didn't. I just saw a few figures in those camouflage coats dash past the open doorway and then the square beyond looked pretty much deserted. Just those caps and

hats strewn on the ground. Lights were on in the secretariat across the street. In the windows, I saw figures carrying stacks of papers. Only then did I notice the truck standing before the secretariat entrance. The cops were loading bundles of files tied up with string. They stood in a row, passing them from one to the next like bricks. Then there was a bright magnesium flash from one side of the square. I turned to catch sight of a man in a black overcoat with an upturned collar, holding a flash camera. It struck me that it had to be Mr. Friedin. I saw one of the higher police officers run over to him. The man pulled out an ID card or something, and moved to show it to the cop. The cop waved it away and reached for the camera. The man tried to hang on to it and kept waving the ID card. Another cop ran over from the other side and seized him by the upper arm. Then the two of them grabbed him and forcibly dragged him inside the secretariat. It was great. I knew it was going to be a sensation. I turned back inside the church, to the altar and the white-robed priest. "Well, isn't that something," said a voice inside me. "Oh, God! Oh, Lord! Oh my Lord! Thank you, God, for everything, for letting me live it, and please, God, let me live through a whole lot more!" I felt splendid, elated. Let the battle continue! Now they're chasing them out there and I was part of it. The only light in the dark and quiet church was the one shining from above the main altar. It was all amazing. Oh, God, oh, Lord, I said to myself. I stared around at those candlelit carved altars, and even though I had stopped believing, I called on God. I kept calling on God. Our Father Who art in heaven, I started praying, and I felt good. Just think if it all hadn't happened. We'd just rot. In all that peace. Good that things happen.

Everything. The whole world. Once more, I saw the war all over again. The liberator planes, guys in steel helmets behind bullet-proof glass, the sun reflecting off the helmets, the slow, majestic flight of long formations in the blue air. That was what I wanted. I felt great. "*Sursum corda*," called the priest, and my heart really lifted, almost to my throat. But then the euphoria began to fade, and I started thinking rationally again. It was stuffy and unpleasant inside

the church. It dawned on me that I was losing precious time. Anything could still be happening out there. Whatever it was, I definitely wanted to be part of it. I touched my fingertips to the icy holy water in the font by the door, crossed myself piously, and split. There were a few people standing around in front of St. Jude Thaddeus. I glanced around the square. It was beginning to fill up with ordinary pedestrians. The lights were still on in the secretariat, but the truck was gone. The cart with the gun was still there on the sidewalk, though. The two cops were still up by the gun, but now they were chatting and laughing with some other cops down on the pavement. I started toward the Powder Tower, but I stopped. I thought maybe I should go over to the Institute. Yes. I turned around and headed toward Poříčí Avenue. Underfoot, the snow crunched with every step. It was almost dark, the lights were on in shop windows but the street lights hadn't come on yet. I turned the corner and soon I was within sight of the YMCA building. A cluster of guys stood huddled there, in front of the sign for the American Institute. I headed toward them.

"Hi," I said. They turned to me, glum and silent.

"Hey there," said Harýk. His hands were rammed in his coat pockets and his collar was turned up. The whole bunch of them looked gloomy and sombre.

"What's up?" I asked.

Harýk nodded toward the doorway. "Look."

I looked over where he was pointing. The American Institute's green glass sign was smashed. Somebody had hit it with a rock or something. There was a hole right in the middle of the glass, with cracks radiating out from it. "Who did that?"

"Comrades," was Harýk's baleful reply.

"How come?"

"They wanted to get inside. A couple of loudmouths were egging them on, inciting them to ransack the place."

"Damn," I said.

"Yeah, we've had it," said Harýk. "And where were you?" he turned back to me.

"Over there, around the corner. On the square."

"What was going on there, man?" Mike asked with interest. The group converged around me. They were anxious to hear.

"The cops lit into the people there."

"We saw that. Some trucks drove by here across Poříčí. So, was there an incident there, or what?"

"Not really. People are too scared," I said. I was never much good at making reports. I preferred to be the one asking questions.

"Right. People are frightened. It's too bad," said Mike.

"We've had it all right," repeated Harýk.

"Wait!" Mike stiffened. We stopped talking. From somewhere came the sound of singing. We moved out of the entrance and stared in the direction of the sound. A fine snowfall had begun, the street lamps had come on, and a black procession appeared, moving through the cone of light under the lamp-post. The marchers were the ones who were singing, and the front ranks brandished a few red flags. We pulled back into the passageway. I thought of some of the films about the Revolution. That's what it felt like. Bunches of people with banners, in fur caps. Darkening night with white snow. Like something out of Aleksander Blok.<sup>5</sup> I took another, closer look. There it was, a splendid, turbulent parade in all its glory. Red banners flapping in the icy wind, men in overcoats with rifles slung over their shoulders. The straps on the rifles were yellow, with the shine of newness on them.

"Factory militia," Harýk said softly. "Guys, let's go upstairs. It's not a good idea to stare too hard."

"Right. Come on up. Maybe they'll know something up there," said Rudy. I didn't feel like it. I would rather have stayed and watched the procession troop toward Wenceslas Square. But the other fellows started away.

"What's up there?" I asked.

"The kids are hooked up to the Všechny bunch at the law faculty."

"And?"

"They say some guys from the Catholic Students Club got pinched."

That fabulous feeling again! Something happening. Of course. It was entirely predictable. First they'd arrest the Catholic Students. And in a flash of clarity, I thought of the option we'd been considering the previous night. No, not an option, a probability. Of splitting across the border. We climbed the stairs. The YMCA porter was standing at the office entrance with a couple of other fellows in agitated conversation. When we appeared, they fell silent, glancing at us, resuming only after they recognized us. We climbed another flight of stairs to the Institute. Haryk opened the door and we stepped inside. Robby was there with Kitty and Lexa. Lexa was hunched over with his ear to the radio set, catching America. Kitty was sitting at the typewriter, smoking. She had rolled a piece of American Institute letterhead into the typewriter, but she wasn't typing. Robby was sitting at the phone, examining a Pan American Airlines brochure.

"Well?" said Haryk.

Robby gave him a frazzled look. He looked downright cinematic. He was wearing colourful socks and a blue-and-white-striped tie. It struck me that before long, it was going to take guts to walk around Prague dressed like that. Certainly as long as packs with red armbands were walking the streets down there.

"Rand is at the faculty," said Robby.

"So they didn't get him."

"No, not yet. He took refuge on academic soil."

"Do you think they'll respect that?" I asked.

Robby shrugged. "We'll see," he said.

"Sit down," said Kitty.

We sat down wherever there was room. On the wall behind Kitty hung an American flag and photographs of Truman and Roosevelt. Haryk lit a cigarette.

"Have any of you been out there?" Kitty asked.

"I was. Down by the secretariat," I said.

"For God's sake, what went on down there?"

"The cops were breaking up the crowd. They brought a heavy machine gun along, just in case."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. Mr. Friedin was taking pictures and they nabbed him."

"You saw Friedin?"

"Yup."

"And what did he say?"

"I never talked to him. I just saw him there, snapping pictures, and then when they picked him up."

"Did they really arrest him?"

"Well, I saw them drag him inside the secretariat."

"And the secretariat, did they ransack it?" asked Robby.

"Totally. They were loading whole boxfuls into a truck."

Just then the telephone rang. Robby grabbed it and said, "Hello?" Some static sounded through. Robby said, "Speaking." Then he listened, with an occasional "I see," and "That's awful," and such. We were all quiet. The room was dim, the only light came from the lamp beside the radio. Lexa had turned down the volume so Robby could hear. I looked around. The rest of them sat in silence, their faces solemn in the yellowish light.

"Right," said Robby. "I'll be there right away. I'll take it across the Old Town Square. So long for now."

We all looked at him. He hung up the receiver and said, "So—I've got to go down to the faculty. Rand wants me for something. One of you hold the fort here for me, okay?"

"I will," said Haryk, getting to his feet.

"All right, and I'll go part way with you," I said, "if that's all right."

"Sure," Robby replied in English, imitating an American movie star.

"Should any of us go along?" Kitty asked.

"No. You stay here. I'll be back in less than an hour. If I can't, I'll call."

"OK," said Kitty, also as cool and matter-of-fact as an actress in an American movie. I admired her. I knew she was finding it thrilling. Just like me. Yes, this was the life. Kitty sat back and took

a long drag on her cigarette. Robby pulled a multicoloured scarf around his neck and looked over at me.

"Are you coming?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Well, so long, my friends," said Robby, switching to English again. The guys mumbled something. Robby opened the door and we stepped out into the hall. It was pleasantly dim there. A warm, hotel kind of dim.

Mr. Aplin, an American on the staff of the institute, came hurrying down the hall. When he saw Robby he slowed down and called out in English, "Hi, Robby! They've arrested Friedin."

"I know," Robby replied.

"I'm calling the embassy. I'll keep you posted."

"Thanks," said Robby.

"So long," Mr. Aplin called, disappearing around the corner.

"So it really was Friedin," I said, reverting to Czech.

"Apparently so."

"I hope there's a stink about it. After all, they had no right to nab him."

"Leave it to Aplin, he'll see to it."

We hurried down the stairs. Robby strode silently down the street. He was worried. Robby was probably in it up to his ears, I thought. Active in the Czech Socialist club, the university students association, and the Institute. But he was great. The picture of utter self-confidence, on the phone and out on the street, amid all the chaos. I was filled with a fierce feeling of fellowship with him.

"I'll only go as far as the Powder Tower with you. I still want to see what's up on Wenceslas Square," I said.

"OK, I have to go see Rand."

We went on in silence for a while. We came to the secretariat square, now filled with normal pedestrian traffic, and from there we could see the Powder Tower. We could also see the red star atop the Communist secretariat shining against the blackness of the night sky.

"Listen, Robby. Just between you and me. Are we really going to do it?"

He gave me a solemn look. And when he spoke, he spoke solemnly too, and I couldn't tell if he was being solemn like in a movie, the way it was all like in a movie, or whether he was being genuinely solemn. He looked at me and said, "My friend, we'll be packing our bags."

That was music to my ears. What a great life! "Robby," I said, "listen, call me about how things turn out with Rand. If need be, you can count on me. For anything, like we agreed."

By then we were at the Powder Tower. Robby reached out to shake my hand and said, "OK. Where should I call you?"

"At Harry's. That's where I'm going now."

"How about Harry?"

"I think he's a hundred per cent."

"Has he got the guts?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, then, look. This is how we've got things set up, Rand and me. The best way is to drive to Domažlice and go to Rudy's. He has a business on the town square. All you have to do is show him your ID. That's it."

"Just my ID?"

"Yes, Rudy knows who's coming. Anyone else shows up, he'll send him packing. Of course, it's all top secret."

"Of course."

We shook hands.

"And what about Kitty?" I asked.

Robby shrugged.

"She's staying behind?"

"Afraid so."

"Can't we do something for her?"

"No room."

"Maybe she could ride with us."

Robby stopped short. He probably didn't love her all that much if he could be so cavalier about leaving her behind, but he

apparently wasn't entirely indifferent to her either. Or maybe it was just his vanity. Robby was thinking about how it would look. If Kitty left when he did, newspapers would write "Secretary of the Young Czech Socialists Robert Malý and His Girlfriend Defect to the West," and that sounds so much better than just plain "Secretary of the Young Czech Socialists Robert Maly." As for me, I kind of liked the idea of travelling the snow-covered roads with the warm, soft Kitty between me and Harry at the wheel. Kitty, with her blonde head on my shoulder. Somewhere in the West with Kitty and her exquisite little figure.

"Do you think you'd have room for her?"

"Sure. You mean she doesn't know?"

"No."

"Then she'll have to be told."

"I'll take care of that—look here—"

"What?"

"I'll call you at Harry's, and if it's all right with him, then I'll call Kitty, OK?"

"OK."

"Have Kitty meet you at Harry's—or no. She can wait for you by the Anděl Restaurant. How does that sound?"

"Fine."

"Because she lives near there, you know? To give her time to pack some things."

"Fine. But no big suitcases."

"Naturally. So that's—settled, right?"

"Settled," I echoed his English, and shook his hand again. "You can call any time after an hour."

His handshake was warm. "So long, my friend. Thank you."

"Don't mention it. I thank you too."

"So long," he repeated, still in English.

"So long," I echoed again, to please him. It was a little embarrassing, a little *outré*, but that was all right. Robby turned and strode off up Celetná Street and I turned back down Příkopy. Suddenly I felt adventurous. A crowd of people with red armbands

was standing in front of the Communist Party secretariat, waiting and listening. Already I was feeling removed from it. And I was looking forward to the trip. A dangerous escapade. That's the life! Down with a stagnant, putrid peace with nothing going on! I was glad both for the ones with the red armbands and for naive, jittery kids like Freddy and Harýk and Doddy. All of them. This was a time when a fellow could truly feel alive! Maybe I was spoiled by the war, somehow. I knew that what I was thinking and feeling was warped, but that's just the way I was. There was no changing it, just like there was no changing the events of this whole week, and so a fellow might as well come to terms with it. Wring out of it everything he can. As I strode down Příkopy, in my head I was packing my bags. No thought of what would happen in the following week. Or that the adventure would come to an end, maybe in just a few hours, maybe a little way across the border, and then it wouldn't be an adventure any more, but a refugee camp in Bavaria. Right now there was just the adventure. Later it might turn into disease and Africa and heaven knows what. But it would be life. Life the way I needed it, life I wasn't prepared to give up. I suddenly recalled that I was supposed to drop in at Doddy's the next day. So what? I just wouldn't show up. It couldn't be helped. Not that I didn't like Doddy, but he was just a kid. A kid who wasn't in on anything. I'd send him a postcard from London. I knew that would get Doddy's goat, but it couldn't be helped. And besides, maybe Doddy would get away too. Sure. It was entirely possible. Then I might even be able to help him somehow. That's it, that's what I'd do.

I turned onto Wenceslas Square. I could see a sea of heads, all the way up to the museum, and the trams were squeezing through with difficulty. People were standing in front of the Koruna snack bar, staring up. A couple of men were arguing fiercely. A squad of men with red armbands was just passing the Koruna. I hurried up the square. That fabulous, ecstatic bliss was still with me. Alive! For once I was alive again! The crowd was denser and darker over by the Melantrich Publishers building.

The old neon flag on the roof wasn't lit. Instead, there was nothing but blackness up there. Up there nothing but blackness and down at sidewalk level, the lights from individual shop windows. I could hear shouting, but I couldn't see anything. People were pressing forward toward the Melantrich building. I stepped off the sidewalk and hurried to the edge of the crowd.

A rumple-haired man bumped into me. "What's happening?" I asked.

"They've taken the Melantrich. The police have," he said, and he was gone.

Around me, people were moving here and there. I blended with the crowd, and made my way to the raised streetcar stop in the middle of the thoroughfare. There, I stood on my toes and looked at the Melantrich building. A heavy iron portcullis had been dropped to bar the doorway. Through the grating, I could see lights, and two cops with automatic rifles pacing back and forth. Just then a hatless, coatless figure leaped out of the crowd ahead of me, grabbed the bars and started to rattle them violently. A chorus of wild voices arose. A red banner appeared, out of nowhere. "Let me at 'em!" screeched a woman's voice. They were Communists. The People. And in a hanging mood. They were out to hang the journalists at *Svobodné slovo* in there. Typical. I grinned to myself at the thought of Rand safe and sound at the faculty, and how Zenkl was probably packing his bags. Zenkl was surely not inside the Melantrich building. But the People rattled the gate. "Let us at 'em!" they hollered. And "Long live Gottwald!" Not far from me, I saw a bunch of crones in red bandannas. The crowd was rocking them back and forth, but passionately and excitedly. I glanced at my watch. I had to get going. I made my way out of the crowd and hurried on. Better to walk than to get stuck in a streetcar. There was a whole line of them, from Můstek at the foot of the square to Vodičková Street in the middle, blocked by the crowd at the Melantrich building. I walked fast. The lights from Lucerna Hall shone out onto the square, and the neon sign for Krohn Brothers Whisky flicked on and off down at the Můstek

end. A procession started down from the museum at the head of the square, waving red flags and placards. It was made up mostly of women. The placards read *Down with the reactionaries* and *We're behind Gottwald*, and it struck me that the latter slogan was apt. Behind Gottwald. They would go behind him no matter where. The People. But it was really all the same to me. I had no opinion on the matter. Maybe they were right, but maybe nobody was entirely right. The main thing, as far as I was concerned, was that it was happening. All of it. The crowds and the cops and the night and the excitement. This was living. I hurried past the museum and up, past the park behind it. It was darker there, and not as crowded. Soon I was at my destination. Inside Harry's building I dropped a half-crown piece in the elevator slot. The halls were silent and deserted. The lighting was dim. The elevator arrived and I stepped inside. I pulled all the gates shut and pushed the button for the fifth floor. Slowly and noiselessly, the elevator started up. I watched the steps outside dropping away, flight by flight, and row upon row of pale yellow doors appearing and disappearing. There was nobody in the halls. Harry lived in a great building. The elevator stopped and I stepped out. The brass plate on Harry's flat read "Harry Rosenblum." That was all. I rang the doorbell. For a while there was no sound, then I heard the shuffle of footsteps. Harry was probably in his slippers. Another moment of silence as he peered out the spyhole, and then he opened the door.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," said Harry. "Come in."

I stepped inside. "Has Robby called?"

"No," said Harry.

"Good," I said, taking off my overcoat. Then I turned gravely to Harry. "Harry, we're packing."

"So it's definite?"

"Definite."

"And when?"

"Probably today."

"Did you speak with Rand?"

"No. With Robby."

"Where's Rand?"

"At the faculty. He took refuge on academic soil," I said sarcastically.

"Oh," said Harry. "Come on inside."

He opened the door to his room. A lamp on the end table was lit, and so was the green eye on the radio. I dropped into an armchair. Harry sat down across from me.

"So the time has come," said he.

"Right. Robby should be calling within the hour. You probably ought to go pack up what you want to take along."

"There's plenty of time."

"And listen," I hesitated. "I promised Robby that we'd take Kitty along. There's no room for her in Rand's car."

"All right."

"You don't mind?"

"No, why should I?"

"I just thought, since we hadn't talked it over first—"

Harry waved a hand. Then he offered me a cigarette. "When is Robby going to call?"

I looked at my watch. "Any time now."

"And then you'll go home and pack?" he asked.

"Yes. He'll check with us to make sure it's OK about Kitty, and then he'll tell her. And then we'll rendezvous with her at the Anděl."

Just then the phone rang. "May I?" I asked.

"Feel free," said Harry.

I picked up the receiver. "Hello, Robby?"

Robby's voice came through, a little distorted. "Yes. So you're at Harry's?"

"I am."

"So listen. It's all set for two hours from now. How about Kitty?"

"It's fine."

"Good. So you be waiting at the Anděl two hours from now, OK?"

"Fine."

"Anything else?"

"Nothing else."

"OK." Robby paused. "Like I said. It's Rudy, and he has a sign on the square. Understood?"

"Sure."

Another pause. I get a malicious kick out of making people a little uncomfortable. I never have any trouble hanging up when I need to, but some people don't know how. So sometimes I let them dangle there in silence, feeling ill at ease. After a while, Robby said, "Well—good luck. So long. I'll be seeing you. Give my regards to Harry."

"I will."

"Well—so long."

"See you," I said, and deliberately waited to see if he'd hang up. He didn't, not right away. He was waiting for me to say something else. I didn't. Then I heard the click as he hung up, so I did too.

"Well?" asked Harry.

"We're all set," I said.

"Right now?"

"Now. In two hours, we're picking up Kitty at the Anděl." Harry was silent. He sat there, holding his pipe in his hand and staring straight ahead. I stood up. "I'd better go pack. I'll be back in about an hour."

Harry shook himself out of his reflections. "Oh, gosh," he said. "All right. In an hour. I'll throw some stuff in a valise too. But don't pack too much."

"Don't worry."

Harry rose. "Do you want a drink?"

"What have you got?"

"What would you like?"

"Whisky?"

Harry opened the liquor cabinet and poured two glasses. I didn't particularly feel like drinking, but since he was offering.... Besides, it went with the situation. This was living too. This was the way a fellow ought to live. Maybe it was just a game a fellow

plays for himself, but even if it was, it beat the hell out of the fusty muzziness at the faculty, for instance. But I wouldn't be going back to the faculty, I thought. Never again, probably. I picked up the glass and downed the whisky. At first I didn't feel anything, but then my stomach began to warm me.

"Well, so long for now," I said, my voice cracking.

The whisky was strong. I wasn't used to drinking any more.

"Goodbye," said Harry, opening the door for me. "Here? In an hour?"

"Yeah," I said. "Bye." I started down the stairs at a run. When I heard Harry shut the door behind me, I slowed down. The steps were low, carpeted in rubber, their edges covered with some sort of sandpaper to prevent slipping. The hallways were still dimly lit and deserted. On the third floor, I could hear a radio blaring. Someone was making a speech. I stopped, wondering if it could be Beneš. But it wasn't. Probably Gottwald or somebody. I heard a few words about reactionaries and that was enough. No, it wasn't Beneš. No way. They wouldn't let Beneš on the air. I kept on going. The next floor down, I passed Colonel Lamprecht. He didn't notice me. He had the classic look of a man in distress. A former colonel in the wartime army attached to the Western forces, here, during a Communist coup. He was married to a Janet from London. They surely wouldn't be sticking around for long. I slipped out the front door. Outside, it was dark and chill. I walked fast. Across Fruit Market Square, then down to the right, onto Sokolská Street. My street looked hellish. Narrow, gloomy, silent as death. Two rows of buildings facing each other, so black that even the night sky beyond them appeared lighter. I got out the key and unlocked the front door. There was no elevator; I had to walk up. The hall was lit by dusty little lamps, and the carved heads of Medusa over every apartment doorway wore identical silly, insipid scowls. This used to be a modern building too. Back under the Habsburgs, I suppose. Maybe then it was worth a fellow's while to marry into this building. Times change. Maybe even for the better, in their own way. But especially now, I thought. I clambered up the four flights and

unlocked the door. The old woman I sublet from was in the kitchen with the light on. I slipped into my room and locked the door, carefully, so she wouldn't hear me. Then I switched on the lamp on my night stand and pulled the curtains shut. I looked around the room. Everything was clean and orderly, the old woman insisted on it. My glance fell on the snapshot of Marta on the desk. I decided to take it along. Not that it mattered particularly, I wasn't actually thinking of Marta at all, and wouldn't be, but I'd take it along. It wouldn't take up much room. Later on, I might even write to her. In her own way, Marta was a swell girl. But, still, she was a girl. Only a girl. And this was a man's world. Yes. That's what I said to myself. In this man's world, girls were only there to pleasure a man. Like Kitty, who would be sitting between me and Harry later on, her thighs warming mine. I could have taken Marta along. But actually, it was better to take Kitty. At least, when we got there, I'd be free, while Robby would be stuck with Kitty. I could see myself with American girls. I knew my idea was straight out of the movies—again—but there would surely be some American girls there. Some WAF or ARC or something. I took the photo out from behind the glass and put it down on the table. Then I pulled the smaller valise out from under my bed, picked up the picture, placed the case on the table and stuck the picture inside it. I walked over to the wardrobe. It dawned on me that I hadn't asked the guys what they were going to wear. Should I put on my skiing outfit and pack some dressy clothes? But what would I do there all the time, dressed in ski clothes? No. I decided I was going to do it in all elegance. I undressed and changed into a suit tailored from the fabric of American army officers' uniforms, dyed a dark brown. In front of the mirror, I put on a necktie, the same kind Robby had on but with brown and white stripes, and combed my hair. I folded two shirts into the valise, two pairs of shorts, a few handkerchiefs, four pairs of socks, my black oxfords, a tube of toothpaste, a bar of soap and four cans of food distributed by UNRRA. That almost filled the case. When I took my best suit out of the wardrobe and carefully folded it on top, the lid still closed. I looked around the room.

What else? I didn't have any jewellery, and my nine dollars were in my wallet. My gaze rested on the bookshelf. A book? But which one? It suddenly seemed to me that there wasn't anything I liked enough to take along. An English Bible lay on top of the bookshelf. A pocket edition, from the Bible Society. There was room for it in the corner of the case. The Bible was good. Some of the Psalms and such. I'll take it, I thought, picking it up and tucking it inside. I stopped to think. No, that was all. I closed the lid and locked it. Then I set it down on the floor and took one more look around. Neckties! Of course. I have to take them. I lifted the case back up on the table, unlocked it, took my neckties out of the wardrobe and folded them into it. They fit just fine. Now, that was everything. By then, my landlady's light was out. She went to sleep early, the old woman. That was good. I picked up the valise, and took one more look around the room. I was leaving everything else behind. Suits, books, clothes, and linens. Those used to matter most to my mother. But Mother was dead. Actually, that was good too. Otherwise I probably couldn't do it. But Mother was dead. I turned out the light and tiptoed to the apartment door. Not a sound from the kitchen. I opened the door and moved the suitcase out into the hallway, careful not to bump it against anything. Then I locked the door. That was very important to the old woman too. Somehow, I didn't want to upset her. After I locked up, I grabbed my suitcase and started back down the stairs. The Medusas were just as silly and insipid as ever. The radio in the landlord's flat was on. The same voice was still talking. The landlord was probably worried. I opened the front door and then I was out on the street. I closed it and set out with my valise towards Fruit Market Square. The air was colder and the sky was darker. It had turned cloudy. That was good for us. There were fewer pedestrians on the streets. People had obviously retired to home and hearth. The bourgeoisie had retired. I thought I heard voices singing from Wenceslas Square. But maybe I just imagined it. Workers and plant militia won't get much sleep tonight, I thought. They had taken to the streets. And the bourgeoisie had retired to their flats. Karlín, Žižkov, Košíře, all

the working-class districts had emptied out onto Wenceslas Square. And in the middle-class districts like Vinohrady and Štěšovice, people were huddled in the dark around their radios, listening to it all. I thought maybe we'd run into trouble on our way. After all, Harry's little Packard was pretty conspicuous. That would be good. Maybe we'd even get shot at. But I had no doubt that we could pull it off. I went inside Harry's building, rode up in the elevator and rang his doorbell. He let me in right away. There was an open suitcase in the vestibule, half full of clothes. I put mine down and looked at my watch. It was half past nine. We still had almost an hour.

"What are you packing?" I asked Harry.

"You know. Stuff," he said. He took a tuxedo out of the closet and folded it into the suitcase. "What are you wearing?" he asked me.

"This."

"Wouldn't something less dressy be better?"

"No way. What would I do with it there?"

"We'll be walking some. And in the snow."

"I can manage."

Harry hesitated. "I don't know, man. I think it's a good idea to bundle up for it."

"But what to wear once we get there?"

"Don't worry. Something will turn up," said Harry. That was when I realized that Harry wasn't going to be travelling on the cheap like me, with just nine dollars to his name. Of course. That was for sure.

"Whatever you say."

"I say it's better that way."

"Whatever."

Harry hesitated again. Then he took a pale grey skiing outfit out of his closet, tight pants and all.

"Are you sure you don't want something too?" he turned to me.  
"I have two."

"Well—" I faltered.

"Feel free, really."

"I don't know—"

"Take it, man. You'll see. It's going to be cold out there."

Actually, he was right. And one thing warmed my heart. Harry had money and I could apparently depend on him. Harry had always been a swell guy.

"Well, then, thanks," I said, and he handed me his other skiing outfit, light brown with yellow trim on the collar. Harry opened the door and we stepped into his room. I took off my brown suit and laid it across the back of an armchair. All of a sudden I felt bad. It was the best suit I owned, and the best made. I hated leaving it behind. It was better than the black one I had packed. It wouldn't be out of place in the Savoy or the Ritz. I pulled on Harry's ski pants and his Norwegian sweater. It was a good fit, Harry and I were built the same. But I still didn't feel right about leaving the suit.

"Damn," I said, "it's too bad about the suit."

"Which suit?"

"This one. It's the best one I've got."

Harry looked at it. "Hmm. It is a good-looking suit," he said.

"I don't know, Harry. Maybe I'll bring it instead of the black one I packed. What do you think?"

"Better not, man. You're going to need a black suit. Why don't you put it in my bag?"

"What?"

"Pack it in my suitcase."

"But what about your stuff?"

"I'm not bringing much of anything."

"No, Harry, that's no good."

"Sure it is. Don't worry. I have other things I'm bringing," smiled Harry. It was his first smile that day. He gave me a look. I understood what kind of other things he meant.

"You know," said Harry.

"Well, then, thanks. Really. Thanks," I said.

"Put it in my bag out in the vestibule," said Harry. I picked up the suit. Harry added, "And don't worry, man. Don't think we're

going to be hard up when we get there. You don't know my uncle in London."

I chuckled. "OK," I said. "If that uncle of yours is half as generous as you are, then it's in the bag."

Harry waved a hand. "And besides. I told you I wasn't going empty-handed."

"OK," I said, walking out into the vestibule. Harry was really a swell guy. Without a doubt the best kind of guy for a venture like this. For that matter, everything was swell. I folded my brown suit carefully on top of Harry's tuxedo and closed the suitcase. It was just full. Harry's suitcase was a bit bigger than mine. I returned to his room. Harry was standing beside an open wall safe.

He turned to me as I walked in. "Look here. Just so you'd know what we're bringing along."

I stepped over beside him. He showed it to me. It was a chest, fair-sized, full of gold and gems. "It's what's left of all my relatives," said Harry. Almost his entire family had perished in the concentration camps. But obviously, they had known where to stash their valuables.

"Besides," Harry reached in his pocket and came up with a roll of banknotes. Dollars. "Ten thousand, man," he said. "That ought to be enough for the trip, don't you think?"

"Certainly," I said reverently. Damn, this leaving the country was turning into something much more grandiose than I expected. But that didn't bother me. On the contrary. That's right, very much the contrary.

Harry reached way inside the safe, feeling around for something. He brought out two British army revolvers and a box of cartridges. "Here," he said, handing one to me.

"Damn. Where'd you get all that?"

"Souvenirs from England. Do you know how to handle one?"

"Well—"

"Look," Harry proceeded to show me how the revolver worked. "You load it here, see, and this is the safety, all right?"

It was easy. With the feel of the cool, dark steel in my hand, the intensely blissful sensation returned.

"But just in case of utmost urgency, understand?"

"Sure," I said. "Don't worry."

"Here," said Harry, passing me a pale leather holster on a strap. I tried to buckle it around my waist. "No," he said, "it goes over your shoulder. Like this," and he fastened it so the holster rested on my chest. "That's for speedy access."

It was a good feeling. The weight of the gun on my chest felt good.

"This is swell. Now we're all set," I said. Harry laughed.

"But like I said, only in case of utmost urgency."

I put on Harry's ski jacket with the yellow facings. There was a bit of a bulge in front where the holster sat. It wouldn't show under my overcoat though. I looked at my watch. Ten o'clock.

"Shouldn't we get going?"

"Right away," said Harry, placing the jewel chest inside a small briefcase. Then he put on his jacket and looked around. "I guess that's all of it," he said.

I said nothing. I was wondering what they would do with such a posh apartment when they found out that Harry was gone. They'd probably assign it, with all its luxury trappings, to some deserving party comrade. That made perfect sense. And it struck me that I would have a lot more trouble giving up a place like Harry's. Leaving my little sublet room was easy, but a place like this would be much harder.

"Yes, well," Harry paused. "Adieu, au revoir," he said finally, switching off the light. The lamp from the vestibule lit our way. We went out and put on our overcoats. Harry opened the door to the corridor and stuck the key in the lock from the outside. I moved our two suitcases out into the hall and Harry locked up. Then he picked up his valise and we walked silently down the stairs. In his other hand, Harry carried the briefcase with the valuables. We didn't meet anyone. Everyone had retired. The muffled sound of radios came from behind several apartment doors. We went down to the underground garage, and Harry turned on the light. There were five cars in the garage, two big American limou-

sines, two little Skodas and Harry's Packard two-seater. The modern shine of the cars mirrored the dim overhead light. Harry opened the trunk and put his bags inside.

"In here," he said. I lifted my own bag into the trunk, and there was still room.

"Just enough for Kitty's," said Harry, closing the trunk. Harry was swell. Sitting three in a two-seat Packard would be crowded, but Harry took it all in his stride. Matter of fact, maybe it wouldn't be too uncomfortable after all, when the third one was Kitty. And Harry was no angel. I knew he wasn't. And neither was Kitty. I was rather looking forward to it.

"Could you open up?" said Harry, handing me the key. I walked up to the garage door, unlocked it and slid it open. It went smoothly, letting in a blast of freezing air. I looked outside and saw that the street was deserted. Harry was in the car already and he started the engine. Its loud roar echoed inside the garage and reverberated down the empty street. Then the headlights went on, shining on the second-floor façade of the building opposite. The car drove out of the garage, up the steep ramp to street level. Harry stopped while I locked the door and walked around the car. He opened the door for me. I handed him the key and climbed inside. There was plenty of room for two. It was dark in the car, except for the glow of the red light by the starter.

"So," said Harry in English. "Goodbye, sweet Piccadilly."

"Bye-bye," said I, as Harry shifted gears and stepped on the gas. Outside, the engine didn't roar at all. The car moved silently and turned onto Ječná Street. We drove on down, quickly and softly, and we were silent too. The streets were practically deserted. As we drove past Štěpánská Street, I turned to look. The steeple of St. Stephen's towered in the dark. I always liked churches. I don't know why. But I knew every church in Prague. Then we drove past the Church of St. Ignatius, and glancing back through the rear window, I saw the faint gleam of the statue's halo. Against the black background of the clouds, it shone like an almost extinct, cooling sun. I often used to come and pray in this

church. There was a painting over the side altar depicting sinners roasting in Hell, gazing up at the crucified Christ in supplication. They had those neat medieval faces. Beards and all. Yes, that was a great church.

A pack of plant militia were marching back and forth by the engineering school but they were silent. You could tell they were freezing. My stomach got a bit of an anxious feeling, but they didn't stop us. Then we drove past the Russian Orthodox church, where during the war the parachutists who assassinated Heydrich took refuge. I caught a glimpse of the brass plaque. Right across from the church was the building where Marta lived. Damn, I thought, I should have brought her instead of Kitty. But no. Better not. Better this way. I had her picture. That was better. Harry turned onto the embankment. In the dim light, the back of the National Theatre looked the same as ever, not all that impressive. On the Slavonic Island, the lights were off. They were on at the Mánes Tower, but it looked empty. We drove along the frozen Vltava River. It shone white against the dark of the sky, its frosty surface marked with tracks left by people and motorcycles. We turned onto the bridge and made for the Smíchov district. Both ends of the bridge were deserted. Way up on our right were the two red lights of the broadcasting tower on Petřín Hill, and further on, Hradčany Castle. There, all the lights were on. I wondered what Beneš might be doing. I couldn't imagine how Beneš felt just then. Me, I felt pretty good. In fact, I really felt wonderful. We drove onto the street across from the bridge.

"Do you know just where Kitty's waiting?" asked Harry.

"Right on the corner by the Anděl Restaurant."

"Beside Girgal's bookstore?"

"Right." I thought of that bad-tempered old man. Well, I thought, they probably wouldn't be publishing his *History of Surrealism*. Not any more they wouldn't. I didn't know just what was going to happen, but my sense was that it would be all progress. Onward and upward. I was glad. This was something a person just had to rebel against. Something that gave him cause

for rebellion. And that was what I needed. Cause. Incentive. Opportunity. And now I was rebelling. Now I felt good again. Harry slowed down as we approached the Anděl. I had a moment of uneasiness, maybe Kitty wouldn't be there yet. But she was. We spied her silhouette standing on the sidewalk right at the corner. She had her hands in her pockets and beside her was a small suitcase. A really small suitcase. Good old Kitty. Harry pulled up beside her. When she registered us, she just picked up her suitcase and stepped off the curb. She didn't wave or signal at all. Good old Kitty. I felt a wave of affection for her. I opened the door and Harry pulled up. I jumped out. Kitty walked around the car.

"Hi!" she said.

"Hi!" I said. "Hop in."

"Put her case in the back," Harry called from the driver's seat.

"Sure," I said. Kitty stooped over and got inside. I caught a glimpse of a leg in a nylon stocking. She wore elegant high boots trimmed with sealskin. I felt a wave of eager anticipation. Looking forward to sitting beside her, to our being crammed close together. I grabbed her suitcase, it was very light, probably nothing in it but silk lingerie and stockings and stuff, I thought, dropping it in the trunk with the rest of the luggage. Then I got back in the car. It was a bit of a squeeze. I shut the door with some difficulty, and locked it. We were packed tight and I could feel Kitty's hot body against me. My left shoulder was pressed against her right. That wasn't going to work.

"Wait a minute, Kitty," I said, raising my left arm and placing it behind her on the back of the seat. Sort of as if I wanted to put my arm around her. "Now lean back," I said, and Kitty tittered.

"Thanks," she said. I looked at her. In the red light by the starter, her skin looked white and smooth. She was looking straight ahead. Beyond her I saw Harry's profile, with his classical Jewish nose and a cigarette in his mouth. The car started forward. The headlights caught the windows of the Ringhoffer plant as Harry pulled into the right lane. On our left, a synagogue slipped past. They were using it for a warehouse or something now. We were pressed right

up against each other and through the thin fabric of Harry's ski pants, Kitty's leg felt nice and warm against mine. This is just how I imagined it. This is it. Me and Kitty and Harry, and behind us Prague in the red fever of revolution. We were fleeing like the aristocrats fled St. Petersburg in 1917. Or like Harry and his uncle in '39. We were fleeing the way fleeing should be. This was the life. Finally, this was living. This was finally living. It was dark inside the car, every so often it would sway and tip Kitty even closer to me till I could feel the muscles in her leg tighten. We drove through Smíchov and the streets were empty, just here and there clusters of people carrying red flags drifting home from the demonstrations in the cold. They hadn't hanged anyone. That was life.

"Say, guys, how come you made up your minds in such a hurry?" Kitty asked. Harry didn't answer. The way Kitty said it, you could tell it was bothering her. Actually, it must've blown her away. Sure. When Robby phoned her out of the blue to pack her bags. I recognized something like apprehension or suspicion in Kitty's voice. Like it was OK now, but it wouldn't have had to be OK, and the fact that it was actually OK just happened, accidentally or coincidentally. Oh, Kitty was no fool, Kitty probably knew exactly what was what. That was fine. She likely knew how much Robby loved her. Not all that much. That was fine. Kitty was a pretty girl and now Robby had let her down a little. More than a little. He had hurt her.

"You only just decided today?" she persisted.

"No. We arranged it already yesterday," I said.

"Who is we?"

"Well, Rand, me, Robby and Harry."

"And why didn't you tell me then?"

"Didn't Robby tell you?" I asked, deliberately, to make sure she got it. It was mean of me, but Robby didn't really love her anyway. So there. And besides, she appealed to me.

"No, he didn't."

"Well, he probably didn't want to worry you unnecessarily."

"Oh, really?" she said with a touch of sarcasm.

"Really."

"Am I that delicate? Have I ever let anyone down?"

"No, but—"

"But Robby didn't want to worry me, is that it?"

"Really. Probably."

"Unnecessarily."

"Huh?"

"He didn't want to worry me unnecessarily."

"Right."

"So yesterday, you still didn't know how things would turn out, is that it?"

"No, yesterday it was still—"

"So how come it occurred to you, all of a sudden like that?"

"Well—it was more or less—it was sort of predictable, right?"

And when that Catholic newsman, Tigrid, split—"

"Tigrid is gone?"

"Right."

"And it still wasn't clear to you guys?"

"Why should—"

"Tigrid took off and you still didn't see it coming?"

"No, that's not it, we just didn't know exactly how we were going to pull it off."

"But you didn't want to worry me unnecessarily."

"Robby didn't."

"So you discussed it."

"Discussed what?"

"That you weren't going to worry me. Unnecessarily."

"No. That was Robby."

"So he told you that, did he?"

"No, it's just what I think. Otherwise, why wouldn't he have told you, right?"

"Oh, come now."

"Well, can you think of any other reason? Like, that he forgot, or—"

"No, I'll tell you why."

"Quit squabbling you two," interjected Harry. We were still in Smíchov, or maybe we'd crossed into Košíře district already.

"We're not squabbling. I'm just trying to find out why Robby didn't tell me yesterday."

"He didn't want to worry you, that's all."

I felt a mild shiver pass through Kitty's body. Or maybe I just imagined it. But now she knew for sure that Robby hadn't been counting on her, and that it wasn't till the last minute, like an afterthought, that she got taken along.

"All right," said Kitty, "let's drop it." And she leaned her head back. Right on my arm. I gave her shoulder a little squeeze.

"Right," I said. "Robby didn't want to worry you, but the main thing is that you weren't worried."

She turned to face me. She smiled and said, "I wasn't the least bit worried."

"Well, then," I said, and squeezed her shoulder again. Then I definitely felt her press her leg against mine in the ski pants. She wanted to play. This Kitty girl, she was swell. I pressed back.

"When do we get to Domažlice?" she asked.

"Harry, when do we get to Domažlice?" I said.

"About five in the morning, if we don't have car trouble."

"Five in the morning," said Kitty. "So I'll catch me some sleep."

"If you can," said Harry.

"Sure I can, comfortably," said Kitty. "Joe has such soft arms. No muscles."

"I beg your pardon," I said, and felt good. It was a great beginning. "You hurt my feelings."

"You really don't have any Muscles, I mean."

"Have I got muscles? Have I?" I said, and tensed my biceps. They were well developed from my fencing. Biceps were something I really had.

"Oh, yes, I see. I take it all back," said Kitty.

"You'd better."

We drove out onto the square at Zámečnice. On our left, high on the hillside, the terribly slender tower of the modern Košíře

church pointed up at the sky. The church was unfinished. I thought of Ota, how he'd slaved for two months over the painting for the altar there. It was supposed to be the Last Judgment. Ota based his on the one by Leonardo and the archbishop didn't care for it. He said it wasn't modern enough. That pissed Ota off. In the end, Zrzavý got the commission with something symmetrical that looked like an ad for Radion laundry soap. That was more to the archbishop's liking. The archbishop was actually quite a modern fellow. He used to go to soccer matches, too. And now there probably wouldn't be any altar painting after all. God only knows what would happen to the archbishop. It occurred to me that maybe they'd lock him up like the Nazis had, but it wasn't a serious thought. Besides, it really didn't matter. The buildings kept getting sparser, until finally we were driving through nothing but hills and farmland. Up on the hill glowed two little lights from the farm at Kotlářka. Straight ahead of us in the west, the sky was black and cloudy. Only down close to the horizon did a little moonlight show through. The road was straight, and climbing. I could feel Kitty's leg warm against mine. She was breathing softly. Maybe she was asleep. I turned around and glanced out the rear window. Down behind us lay the puddle of night-lit Prague. Strings of streetlights swayed gently along the suburban streets, and downtown gave off the glow of red and blue neon. I turned back. Harry was driving in silence, his face lit red by the starter light. Kitty's eyes were shut, her lips were closed too. In this light, her lips looked black. In front of us, the road rose straight ahead and up toward the black sky. I settled back comfortably in my seat. I could feel the car moving.

I realized abruptly that some of the excitement and bliss had petered out. But I had no regrets. None at all. Besides, regrets are stupid. Everything a person does in his life is done and over with and can't be changed. So regretting anything is stupid. Absolutely. Really stupid. Real stupid. Absolutely. Absolutely for sure.

1. President Edvard Beneš headed one of post-war Europe's more or less democratic regimes, but the Communist coup of February 1948 (events described in this story) put an end to his government and ushered in forty years of totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia.
2. Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (1850–1937), philosopher, educator, first president of Czechoslovakia (1918–1935), considered "father of the country."
3. Refers to November 1939 and the student anti-Nazi demonstrations on Wenceslas Square, violently suppressed, followed by the closing of the university and the deportation of several thousand students to concentration camps.
4. Reinhard Heydrich (1904–1942), Reichsprotector in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia. His assassination by Czech underground fighters led to extreme tension and reprisals. Karl Herrmann Frank (1898–1946), the Nazi official responsible for brutal reprisals after Heydrich was assassinated.
5. Aleksander Blok (1880–1921), Russian mystical revolutionary poet and dramatist.