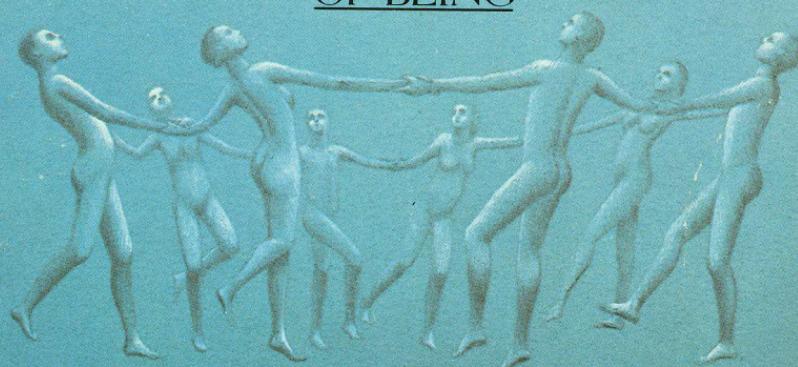


BY THE AUTHOR OF  
THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS  
OF BEING



MILAN  
KUNDERA  
The Book of  
Laughter and  
Forgetting



## Who Is Kristyna?

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Kristyna is a woman in her thirties. She has a child, a butcher husband with whom she lives in perfect harmony, and an on-again-off-again affair with the local mechanic, who makes love to her once in a long while after hours in the rather cramped conditions of the garage. Small-town life does not particularly lend itself to extramarital love, or, rather, it requires inordinate ingenuity and courage, qualities with which Kristyna is not abundantly endowed.

Which is why she was so utterly confused by her meetings with the student. He had come to town to spend the summer vacation with his mother, and after staring at her twice behind the counter in the butcher's shop, he had gone up and spoken to her at the local swimming place, and was so charmingly shy that Kristyna, accustomed as she was to her butcher and her mechanic, could not resist. The only time she had dared touch another man since her marriage (a good ten years by then) was in the security of a locked garage amid dismantled cars and balding tires, and suddenly she made up her mind to accept a rendezvous out in the open and expose herself to the danger of prying eyes. Even though the places they chose for their walks were quite remote and the probability of their being recognized practically nonexistent, Kristyna's heart would pound and she would be consumed with titillating fear. The more bravely she faced the danger, the more reserved she was with the student. He did not get very far with her—a few fast hugs and tender kisses. She would wriggle out of his arms and press her legs together whenever he ran his hand along her body.

It was not that she did not want him; it was just that she had fallen in love with his gentle shyness and wanted to preserve it for herself. No man had ever expounded his philosophy of life or dropped names of great poets and thinkers to her. The student, poor boy, had nothing else to talk about. The range of his seductive patter was so limited that he was unable to adjust it to

women of different social levels. Besides, he did not feel particularly handicapped in this case, because quotations from the philosophers would make a much stronger impression on a simple butcher's wife than on a fellow student. What he failed to see was that while a well-chosen quote might charm her soul, it also placed a barrier between him and her body. She had a vague fear that by surrendering her body to the student, she would drag their relationship down to the level of her relationship with the butcher or mechanic and she would never hear another word about Schopenhauer.

With the student she felt a modesty she had never known before; with the butcher and the mechanic she could say whatever she pleased and even laugh at it. For instance, that they had to be very careful about making love because the doctor who'd delivered her child had told her not to have any more—it could be dangerous to her health or even fatal. All this happened a long time ago, when abortions were strictly forbidden and women had no access to birth control. The butcher and the mechanic had no trouble understanding her fears, and before she allowed them to enter her, she would make a playful show of checking to see they had taken the necessary precautions. But whenever she imagined going through it with her angel, who had come down from a cloud where he hobnobbed with Schopenhauer, she froze completely. I therefore conclude that her reserve had two motivations: to keep the student as long as possible in the enchanting realm of tenderness and timidity, and to avoid repelling him as long as possible with the mundane directions and details that her notion of physical love required.

All his fine words notwithstanding, the student was adamant. No matter how tightly she squeezed her thighs together, he kept a firm grip on her backside, a grip implying that a man who quotes Schopenhauer does not necessarily mean to give up a body he finds desirable.

When his vacation came to an end, the lovers realized they would find it hard not to see each other for a whole year. The only possibility was for Kristyna to think up an excuse to go to Prague.

They both knew what her visit would mean. The student lived in a tiny attic room, and she would have no choice but to spend the night.

### What Is *Litost*?

*Litost* is a Czech word with no exact translation into any other language. It designates a feeling as infinite as an open accordion, a feeling that is the synthesis of many others: grief, sympathy, remorse, and an indefinable longing. The first syllable, which is long and stressed, sounds like the wail of an abandoned dog.

Under certain circumstances, however, it can have a very narrow meaning, a meaning as definite, precise, and sharp as a well-honed cutting edge. I have never found an equivalent in other languages for this sense of the word either, though I do not see how anyone can understand the human soul without it.

Let me give an example. One day the student went swimming with his girlfriend. She was a top-notch athlete; he could barely keep afloat. He had trouble holding his breath underwater, and was forced to thrash his way forward, jerking his head back and forth above the surface. The girl was crazy about him and tactfully kept to his speed. But as their swim was coming to an end, she felt the need to give her sporting instincts free rein, and sprinted to the other shore. The student tried to pick up his tempo too, but swallowed many mouthfuls of water. He felt humiliated, exposed for the weakling he was; he felt the resentment, the special sorrow which can only be called *litost*. He recalled his sickly childhood—no physical exercise, no friends, nothing but Mama's ever-watchful eye—and sank into utter, all-encompassing despair. On their way back to the city they took a shortcut through the fields. He did not say a word. He was wounded, crestfallen; he felt an irresistible desire to beat her. "What's wrong with you?" she asked him, and he went into a tirade about how the undertow on the other side of the river was very dangerous and he had told her not to swim over there and she could

have drowned—then he slapped her face. The girl burst out crying, and when he saw the tears running down her face, he took pity on her and put his arms around her, and his *litost* melted into thin air.

Or take an instance from the student's childhood: the violin lessons that were forced on him. He was not particularly gifted, and his teacher would stop him and point out his mistakes in a cold, unbearable voice. It humiliated him, he felt like crying. But instead of trying to play in tune and make fewer mistakes, he would make mistakes on purpose. As the teacher's voice became more and more unbearable, enraged, he would sink deeper and deeper into his bitterness, his *litost*.

Well then, what is *litost*?

*Litost* is a state of torment caused by a sudden insight into one's own miserable self.

One of the standard remedies for personal misery is love. The recipient of an absolute love cannot be miserable. All his faults are redeemed by love's magic eyes, which make even uncoordinated thrashing and a head jerking back and forth above the water look charming.

The absolute quality of love is actually a desire for absolute identification. We want the woman we love to swim as slowly as we do; we want her to have no past of her own to look back on happily. But as soon as the illusion of absolute identity falls apart (the girl looks back happily on her past or picks up speed), love turns into a permanent source of that great torment we call *litost*.

Anyone with broad experience in the general imperfectability of mankind is fairly well protected against its excesses. He accepts insights into his own miserable self as ordinary and uninteresting. *Litost*, in other words, is characteristic of immaturity. It is one of the ornaments of youth.

*Litost* works like a two-stroke motor. First comes a feeling of torment, then the desire for revenge. The goal of revenge is to make one's partner look as miserable as oneself. The man can't swim, but the woman cries when slapped. It makes them feel equal and keeps their love alive.

Since revenge can never reveal its true motivation (the student can't tell the girl he slapped her because she swam too fast), it must plead false ones. In other words, *litost* is unthinkable without a kind of passionate hypocrisy: the young man proclaims he was frantic at the thought of his girl drowning, and the child plays agonizingly off-key, feigning hopeless ineptitude.

I was originally going to call this chapter *Who Is the Student?* But even if it now deals with the emotion I call *litost*, it still is very much about the student as well. In fact, the student represents *litost* incarnate. No wonder the girl he was in love with finally left him. There is nothing particularly pleasant about having your face slapped for knowing how to swim.

The butcher's wife from his hometown entered his life in the form of a giant-sized bandage ready-made for his wounds. She admired him, worshiped him. When he talked to her about Schopenhauer, she never tried to make her own independent personality felt by raising objections (as did the girlfriend of inglorious memory); and when she looked at him, he was so moved by her emotion he seemed to see tears welling up in her eyes. We must also bear in mind that he had not made love since breaking up with his girlfriend.

## Who Is Voltaire?

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Voltaire is a lecturer at the university, a witty and aggressive young man whose eyes glare maliciously into the faces of his adversaries—reason enough for his nickname.

He liked the student, which was no mean distinction; he was very particular about the company he kept. One day, after a seminar, he went up to the student and asked if he was free the following evening. Too bad, the very time Kristyna was due to arrive. It took the student all the courage he could muster to tell Voltaire he was busy. But Voltaire wouldn't hear of it. "You can put it off, can't you?"

You won't regret it." Apparently the best poets in the country were getting together at the Writers' Club, and Voltaire, who would be there too, wanted the student to meet them.

And yes, the great poet whom Voltaire was writing a monograph on, the one he was always going to visit—he would be there too. He was ill and walked on crutches, so he was hardly ever seen in society, and the chance to meet him was all the more valuable.

The student knew the work of all the poets taking part, and had memorized entire pages by the great poet. Nothing would have pleased him more than to spend an evening in their company. But then he remembered he hadn't slept with a woman for months, and told Voltaire again he would not be able to make it.

Voltaire refused to accept the idea that anything could be more important than meeting great men. A woman? Couldn't it be postponed? His glasses were alive with sparks of irony. But all the student could see was the butcher's wife slipping out of his hands that whole month, and hard as it was to do, he shook his head. Kristyna meant as much to him at that moment as all his country's poetry.

## The Compromise

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She arrived in the morning. During the day she did the errand that served as her alibi. The student had arranged to meet her in the evening at a restaurant he had selected himself. When he entered, he was shocked to find the main room overflowing with drunks. The small-town fairy princess of his vacation was sitting in the corner near the rest rooms at a table meant for dirty dishes. She was dressed in her awkward Sunday best, the stereotype of a provincial lady visiting the capital after a long absence and looking forward to its joys. She was wearing a hat, some large beads, and black high-heeled pumps.

The student felt his cheeks burning—with disappointment, not excitement. Against the backdrop of a small town populated by

butchers, mechanics, and pensioners, Kristyna had stood out as she never could in the Prague of pretty students and hairdressers. With her laughable beads and discreet gold tooth (in the upper left corner of her mouth) she seemed to personify the antithesis of the youthful, jeans-clad beauty that had been rejecting him so cruelly for the past few months. He wended his way insecurely over to her table, taking his exasperation, his *litost*, along with him.

If the student was disappointed, so was Kristyna. The restaurant the student had invited her to had a nice name—the King Wenceslaus—and Kristyna, a stranger to Prague, assumed it would be a high-class establishment where he would wine and dine her, their first stop on a whirlwind tour of Prague by night. When she saw that the King Wenceslaus was on the same level as the place the mechanic went for beer and that she would have to wait for the student in the corner near the rest rooms, what she felt instead of the delicate ineffable emotion I have called *litost* was good old everyday anger. By which I mean that instead of feeling miserable and humiliated, she felt that her student did not know how to behave. She lost no time in telling him so either. Her face was livid, and she used the same language with him she used with the butcher.

There they stood, face to face, she loud and voluble in her abuse, he weak in his defense. His antipathy toward her rose sharply. All he wanted was to take her back to his room, hide her from everybody's sight, and test whether the intimacy of their hideaway would bring back the lost magic. She refused. It wasn't every day she got to Prague. She wanted to see things, go places, have a good time. Those black heels and colored beads were adamant about their rights.

"This is usually a great place," said the student. "All the best people come here." He wanted to make the butcher's wife feel she couldn't begin to understand what counted in Prague and what didn't. "Unfortunately, there isn't any room today, so I'll have to take you somewhere else." But every other place turned out to be just as crowded, it took a long time to go from one to the next, and Kristyna looked unbearably funny with her hat and beads and shiny gold tooth. As they walked through streets overflowing with young

women, the student realized he would never forgive himself for missing an evening with the greats of his country to spend an evening with Kristyna. On the other hand, he did not wish to make an enemy of her; as I have pointed out, he had not made love in a long time. The only way he could resolve the dilemma was to come up with a brilliant compromise.

Finally they found a free table at an out-of-the-way café. The student ordered two apéritifs and looked mournfully into Kristyna's eyes. Life here in Prague was full of unexpected events, he told her. Yesterday, for example, he had had a phone call from the country's most famous poet.

Kristyna stiffened when he said the poet's name. She had memorized his poetry in school, after all; and people we memorize in school have something unreal, incorporeal, about them. Even while they are alive, they belong to the exalted gallery of the immortals. Kristyna could not believe that the student actually knew him personally.

Of course he did, declared the student. He was even writing his thesis on him, a monograph that had a good chance of being published. The only reason he hadn't told her about it before was that he didn't want her to think he was showing off, but now he had to tell her because the poet had unexpectedly put an obstacle in their path. There was a private get-together of poets at the Writers' Club that evening, and only a very few critics and insiders had been invited. It was an extremely important meeting. There was sure to be a debate, and would the sparks fly! But obviously he wasn't planning to attend. He'd been so looking forward to his meeting with her!

In my sweet, strange country, poets still exercise a charm over the hearts of women, and Kristyna now admired the student more than ever. She also felt a maternal desire to give him advice and defend his interests. With laudable and unanticipated naïveté she announced it would be a shame for the student to miss the meeting the great poet was going to attend.

The student said he had tried to persuade them to let her come along with him because he knew she would enjoy seeing the

great poet and his friends, but unfortunately it wasn't possible. Even the great poet wasn't bringing his wife. It was strictly for specialists. At first the student hadn't really thought of going, but now he realized Kristyna might be right. Yes, it was actually a good idea. Supposing he did drop by for an hour or so. She could wait for him at his apartment, and when he got back, there would be just the two of them.

Leaving behind the lure of the theaters and nightclubs, Kristyna followed the student up to his attic apartment. For a while she felt the same disappointment as when she had stepped into the King Wenceslaus. It hardly deserved to be called an apartment; it didn't even have an entrance hall. It was more like a cubbyhole with a couch and desk. But she had lost confidence in her own judgment; she had entered a world with a mysterious scale of values she could not fathom. So she quickly made her peace with the uncomfortable, dirty room, and mobilized all her feminine talent to make herself at home in it. The student asked her to take her hat off. He kissed her, sat her down on the couch, and showed her his modest library so she would have something to read while he was away.

All of a sudden she had an idea. "You don't happen to have one of his books, do you?" She meant the great poet.

Yes, the student had one of his books.

"Well, maybe you could give it to me," she went on very hesitantly, "and ask him to write me a dedication."

The student's face lit up. The great poet's dedication would make up for the theater and nightclubs. She had given him a bad conscience, and he was willing to do anything for her. Just as he expected, her magic had returned in the privacy of the attic. The girls strolling through the streets had vanished, and the charm of her modesty quietly filled the room. His disappointment melted slowly away, and he left for the club calm and content at the thought of the coming evening's exciting double program.

## The Poets

The student waited for Voltaire in front of the Writers' Club, and the two of them went upstairs together. As soon as they passed through the cloakroom into the vestibule, they heard an exuberant din. Voltaire opened the door to the dining room, and before the student's eyes was his country's poetry sitting around a large table.

I watch them from a distance of two thousand kilometers. It is now the autumn of 1977. For eight years my country has been drowsing in the sweet, strong embrace of the Russian empire, Voltaire has been thrown out of the university, and my books are banned from all public libraries, locked away in the cellars of the state. I held out a few years and then got into my car and drove as far west as I could, to the Breton town of Rennes, where the very first day I found an apartment on the top floor of the tallest high-rise. When the sun woke me the next morning, I realized that its large picture windows faced east, toward Prague.

Now I watch them from my tower, but the distance is too great. Fortunately the tear in my eye magnifies like the lens of a telescope and brings their faces closer. Now I can make out the great poet, the undisputed center of attention. Although he is certainly more than seventy, his face is still handsome, his eyes wise and lively. His crutches are leaning up against the table next to him.

I see them against the night lights of Prague the way it was fifteen years ago, before their books had been locked away in the cellars of the state, when they could all have a happy, raucous time together around a large table laden with bottles. I like them all and wouldn't feel right picking random names for them from the telephone book. If I do have to hide their faces behind the masks of assumed names, I might as well make them a gift of it, a decoration, an honor.

If the students call the lecturer Voltaire, what is to stop

## Litost

me from calling the great and greatly revered poet Goethe?

And the poet across from him Lermontov.

And the one with the dreamy black eyes Petrarch.

But along with Verlaine, Yesenin, and several others not particularly worth mentioning, there is a man who must be there by mistake. It is absolutely plain (I can see it from two thousand kilometers) that the muse of poetry has never yet bestowed her favors on him, that he does not even care for verse. His name is Boccaccio.

Voltaire took two chairs from the wall, pushed them over to the bottle-laden table, and introduced the student to the poets. All the poets nodded civilly in his direction, all but Petrarch, who was so engrossed in an argument with Boccaccio that he did not even notice him. "Women always get the better of us," he said, summing up. "I could go on about it for weeks."

"That's a bit much," said Goethe. "How about ten minutes' worth?"

## Petrarch's Story

"The most unbelievable thing happened to me a week ago. My wife had just taken a bath. She was wearing a red negligee and had let down her long golden hair. She looked beautiful. At ten past nine there was a ring at the door. I opened it and saw a girl pressing up against the wall. I recognized her right away. Once a week I go to a girls' school that has a poetry club. The girls are all secretly in love with me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked her.

"There's something I have to tell you!"

"And what might that be?"

"I have something terribly important to tell you!"

"Look," I said, "it's late and you can't come in now. Go downstairs and wait for me at the door to the basement."

"I went back to the bedroom and told my wife that somebody had rung the wrong bell. Then I added nonchalantly that I had

to go down to the basement for coal, and picked up two empty buckets. That was a tactical error. My gallbladder had been bothering me all day, and I'd spent some of it in bed. The sudden burst of energy must have raised her suspicions."

"You have gallbladder problems?" asked Goethe with interest.

"And have for many years," said Petrarch.

"Why don't you have an operation?"

"Not on your life," said Petrarch.

Goethe nodded sympathetically.

"Where did I leave off?" Petrarch asked.

"You're having gallbladder problems and you've picked up two coal buckets," prompted Verlaine.

"I found the girl waiting at the door to the basement," Petrarch continued, "and invited her down with me. And as I shoveled coal into the buckets, I tried to find out what she wanted. She kept repeating that she *had* to see me. I couldn't get anything else out of her.

"Suddenly I heard steps coming down the staircase. I grabbed the bucket I had filled, and ran up out of the basement right into my wife. 'Here,' I said, handing her the bucket. 'I'm going back down to fill the other one.' My wife went upstairs with the bucket, and I went down to the basement and told the girl we couldn't stay there and she'd better go and wait for me outside. I shoveled the bucket full of coal and ran back up to the apartment with it. I gave my wife a kiss and told her to go lie down, I was going to take a bath before bed. She got into bed, and I turned on the water in the bathtub. The water made a good loud noise against the bottom of the tub. I took off my slippers and went out into the hall in my stocking feet. The shoes I had worn that day were next to the front door. I left them there as proof I hadn't left the house. Then I took another pair of shoes out of the closet, put them on, and slipped out of the apartment."

"We all know what a great poet you are, Petrarch," interrupted Boccaccio, "but now for the first time I see the strategist in you, the clever tactician blinded by passion. That little maneuver

with the slippers and two pairs of shoes was a stroke of genius!"

Everyone agreed with Boccaccio and showered Petrarch with praise, which clearly flattered him.

"Anyway, there she was outside, waiting for me," he went on. "I did what I could to calm her. I told her I had to go in and invited her back the next morning when I knew for certain my wife would be at work. There's a tram stop right in front of our building, and I tried to talk her into getting on a tram. But when one finally came, she burst into hysterics and tried to run back into the building."

"You should have pushed her under the tram," said Boccaccio.

"Friends," said Petrarch almost ceremoniously, "there are times when a man is forced to be brutal with a woman. So I said to her, 'If you won't go home by yourself, I'll lock you out of the building. Keep in mind this is my home. I can't go turning it into a stable!' And don't forget, gentlemen, that all the time I was arguing with her down there in front of the building, the water was running in the bathroom and the bathtub could overflow any minute!"

"I turned and made a dash to the front door. The girl took off behind me. Unfortunately, there were some other people going in the door at just that time and the girl slipped in with them. I ran up those stairs like a sprinter! I could hear her footsteps just behind me. We live four flights up, and it was tough going, but I was faster. I slammed the door in her face just in the nick of time. Then I ripped the doorbell wires down from the wall so nobody could hear her ringing—I was positive she'd lean on that bell for all she was worth—and ran into the bathroom on tiptoe."

"The tub hadn't overflowed?" asked Goethe anxiously.

"I turned off the water at the last minute. Then I went back to have another look at the door. I opened the peephole and saw her standing there motionless, staring at the door. Gentlemen, I was scared. I was afraid she'd stand there all night."

## Boccaccio Makes Trouble

"You're an incorrigible idolizer, you know that, Petrarch?" said Boccaccio, interrupting him. "I can just imagine the type of girl who would join a poetry club and invoke you as her Apollo. You couldn't get me near her. A woman poet is twice a woman. More than a misogynist like me can bear."

"Tell me, Boccaccio," said Goethe, "why do you make so much of being a misogynist?"

"Because only the best of men are misogynists."

All the poets reacted to these words with hooting and booing, and Boccaccio was forced to raise his voice. "Now, don't misunderstand me. The misogynist doesn't despise women; he dislikes womankind. From time immemorial men have been divided into two large categories: idolizers—also known as poets—and misogynists—or, rather, gynophobes. Idolizers or poets worship the traditional feminine values like feelings, house and home, motherhood, fertility, divine flashes of hysteria, and the divine voice of nature in us; misogynists or gynophobes experience mild terror at the thought of them. The idolizer worships womankind in a woman; the gynophobe prefers the woman to womankind. And keep one thing in mind: a woman can be happy only with a misogynist. No woman has been happy with any of you!"

There was a fresh round of hooting and booing.

"The idolizer or poet may give a woman drama, passion, tears, and worries; he will never give her contentment. I knew one once. He worshiped his wife. Then he began worshiping somebody else's. He refused to humiliate the former by deceiving her or the latter by sleeping with her on the sly. So he made a clean breast of it to his wife and asked her to help him. She couldn't take it and fell ill, and he began weeping all the time, so much so that the other woman finally put her foot down and broke up with him. One day he lay down on the tram rails to end it all, but unfortunately the

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driver saw him from far off, and my idolizer got stuck with a fifty-crown ticket for disturbing traffic."

"Liar! Boccaccio's a liar!" shouted Verlaine.

"The story Petrarch's just told you is cut from the same cloth," countered Boccaccio. "What has your wife of the golden tresses done to make you take a hysterical girl like that so seriously?"

"What do you know about my wife?" shouted Petrarch. "My wife is my faithful companion! There are no secrets between us!"

"Then why did you change your shoes?" asked Lermontov.

But Petrarch stuck to his guns. "Friends," he said, "at that crucial moment when the girl was standing out in the hall and I didn't have the faintest idea what to do, I went straight to the bedroom and made a clean breast of it all to my wife."

"Just like my idolizer!" laughed Boccaccio. "The clean-breast syndrome! The idolizer's first reflex! I'll bet you asked her to help you, too."

Petrarch's voice was tenderness itself. "Yes, I did ask her to help. She'd never refused me before, she didn't then. She went to the door herself. I stayed back in the bedroom. I was scared."

"I'd have been scared too," said Goethe sympathetically.

"Well, she came back perfectly calm. She'd looked through the peephole into the hall, opened the door, and found nobody. It looked as though I'd made the whole thing up. But suddenly behind us we heard a loud noise, followed by the sound of shattering glass. As you know, we live in an old apartment house, the kind with galleries around the courtyard on each floor. Anyway, when no one answered the girl's ringing, she picked up an iron bar from somewhere and walked along the gallery smashing all our windows, one after the other. We stood there watching her from inside—helpless, horror-struck. And then we saw three white shadows appear on the other side of the dark gallery. It was the old ladies from the apartment across the way. They'd been awakened by the sound of the glass shattering, and had run out in their nightgowns, all eyes and ears, hoping for a scandal. Just picture it: a beautiful young girl holding an iron bar surrounded by the ominous shadows of three witches!"

"Anyway, after she broke the last window, she climbed through it into the room.

"I wanted to go up and speak to her, but my wife put her arms around me and begged me not to. 'She'll kill you!' There stood the girl in the middle of our bedroom, iron bar in hand, Joan of Arc with sword, stunning, majestic. I tore myself away from my wife's embrace and began walking toward her. As I came closer, the girl's face lost its intimidating expression; it became gentle, suffused with a heavenly peace. I snatched the bar from her, threw it down on the floor, and grabbed her by the hand."

## Insults

"I don't believe a word of it," said Lermontov.

"It didn't happen quite the way Petrarch told it, of course," said Boccaccio, interrupting again, "but I do believe it happened. The girl was a hysteric, and any normal man in his place would have long since given her a healthy slap or two. Idolizers or poets have always been prime booty for hysterics. Hysterics know that idolizers will never slap them. Idolizers are helpless when faced with a woman because they've never left their mothers' shadows. They see an envoy from their mothers in every woman and immediately give in. Their mothers' skirts hang over them like the firmament." He liked this last sentence so much he tried a few variations on it. "See that expanse up there over your heads, all you poets? Well, that's no sky, it's your mothers' enormous skirts. You all live under your mothers' skirts!"

"What's that you said?" bellowed Yesenin with incredible force, jumping out of his chair. He was teetering. He had drunk the most of anyone all evening. "What's that you said about my mother? What's that you said?"

"I wasn't talking about your mother," said Boccaccio mildly. He knew that Yesenin was living with a famous ballerina thirty years his elder and in fact felt genuinely sorry for him. But the spittle was

ready on Yesenin's lips, and he bent over and let it fly. He was too drunk; it landed on Goethe's collar. Boccaccio took out a handkerchief and wiped it off the great poet.

Exhausted by the act of spitting, Yesenin collapsed into his chair.

"Let me tell you what she said to me, friends," continued Petrarch. "It was unforgettable, like a prayer, a litany. 'I'm a simple girl, a perfectly ordinary girl. I have nothing to give you, but I have come at love's behest. I want you to feel'—by now she was squeezing my hand—'real love, I want you to taste it once in your life.'"

"And what did your wife say to this herald of love?" asked Lermontov, his voice heavy with irony.

"What Lermontov wouldn't give for a woman to break his windows!" Goethe laughed. "He'd even pay her to do it!"

Lermontov threw Goethe a hostile glance, and Petrarch took up again. "My wife? You're wrong if you think this is all just one of Boccaccio's silly stories, Lermontov. The girl turned to my wife with her heavenly eyes and said—again like a prayer, a litany—'Don't be angry, I know you are good and I love you as I love him, I love you both.' Then she took her hand too."

"If that had been a scene from one of Boccaccio's silly stories, I would have nothing against it," said Lermontov. "But no, it's much worse. It's bad poetry."

"You're just jealous," Petrarch shouted at him. "You've never been alone in a room with two beautiful women who love you! Do you have any idea how beautiful my wife is when her golden hair flows down over her red negligee?"

When Lermontov responded with a malicious laugh, Goethe decided to punish him for his general ill will. "Nobody doubts you're a great poet, Lermontov," he said, "but why are you so full of complexes?"

Lermontov was thunderstruck. "You shouldn't have said that, Johann," he said to Goethe, scarcely containing himself. "That was the worst thing you could have said. A low blow."

Now Goethe, a great lover of peace and harmony, would never have gone any farther, but his biographer, our four-eyed Vol-

taire, laughed and said, "Everybody knows about your complexes, Lermontov," and went on to analyze his poetry, which lacked Goethe's grace, Petrarch's passion. He even began analyzing individual metaphors, arguing wittily that Lermontov's inferiority complex was the font of his imagination and that it came from a childhood marked by poverty and the oppressive influence of an authoritarian father.

Just then Goethe leaned over to Petrarch and whispered in a stage whisper that filled the room and was heard by everyone, including Lermontov, "No, no. He's got it all wrong. The trouble with Lermontov is he doesn't get enough ass."

### The Student Stands Up for Lermontov

All this time the student had sat quietly, pouring himself wine (a discreet waiter noiselessly removed the empty bottles and brought back full ones) and straining to catch every word of the scintillating conversation. He needed all his wits to keep up with the poets' giddy gyrations.

He tried to decide which of them he liked best personally. He worshiped Goethe no less than Kristyna did, no less than the entire country, for that matter. He was fascinated by Petrarch and his burning eyes. But strangely enough, he felt closest to the much-maligned Lermontov. It was Goethe's last remark that decided him. Suddenly he saw that even a great poet (and Lermontov really was a great poet) could have the same problems as an insignificant student such as himself. He glanced at his watch and realized he had better be going if he did not want to end up like Lermontov.

But somehow he couldn't tear himself away from the great poets, and instead of going back to Kristyna, he went to the men's room. He was standing there staring at the white tile and thinking when suddenly he heard Lermontov's voice next to him saying, "You heard them. They're not very *subtle*, you know what I mean? Not very *subtle*."

He said the word "subtle" as if it were in italics. Yes, some words are not like others; they have a special meaning known only to initiates. The student did not know why Lermontov said the word "subtle" as if it were in italics, but I, who am among the initiates, know that Lermontov once read Pascal's *pensée* about subtle minds and geometrical minds, and since then he had divided all mankind into those who are subtle and those who are not.

"Or do you think they are subtle?" he challenged the mute student.

Buttoning his fly, the student noticed that, just as the Countess N. P. Rostopchina noted in her diary, Lermontov had very short legs. The student was extremely grateful to him. He was the first great poet ever to honor him with a serious question and request a serious answer.

"Not the least bit subtle," he said.

Lermontov turned around on his short legs and said, "No, not the slightest bit." And raising his voice he added, "But I have my *pride*. Understand? I have my *pride*."

He pronounced the word "pride" in italics too, an italics implying that only a fool could put Lermontov's pride on a level with a girl's pride in her beauty or a shopkeeper's in his wares. No, his was a special pride, exalted and richly deserved.

"I've got my pride!" shouted Lermontov as he and the student walked back into the room. They sat down just in time to hear Voltaire deliver an encomium to Goethe. Lermontov was seething. He stood up again—which instantly made him a head taller than everyone else—and said, "Now I'm going to tell you why I'm so proud. Now I'm going to tell you what I'm so proud about. There are only two poets in this country: Goethe and me."

"You may be a great poet," Voltaire countered immediately, "but if you go around saying things like that about yourself, you're a very small man!"

Lermontov was so startled he could only stutter, "Well, why shouldn't I say them?" and he repeated "I've got my pride!" a few more times. Soon Voltaire was roaring with laughter, and the others began to join in.

The student saw his chance. He stood up the way Lermontov had, looked around at everyone present, and said, "You don't understand Lermontov. A poet's pride is very different from ordinary pride. Only the poet himself can know the true worth of what he writes. Others don't understand it until much later, they may never understand. A poet has got to have his pride. Without it he would betray his life's work."

Even though they had been roaring with laughter a minute before, they suddenly saw the student's point. In fact, they had every bit as much pride as Lermontov, they were simply ashamed to say so. They did not realize that when the word "pride" is pronounced with the proper emphasis, there is nothing laughable about it, it is witty and noble. So they were grateful to the student for giving them such useful advice, and one or another of them—it may have been Verlaine—even applauded him.

### Goethe Turns Kristyna into a Queen

When the student took his seat, Goethe turned to him with a friendly smile and said, "Now there's a boy who knows his poetry!"

The others had sunk back into their drunken debates, so the student was left face to face with the great poet. He wanted to make the best of the precious opportunity, but suddenly did not know what to say. While his mind searched desperately for a suitable response, Goethe just sat there smiling at him, and since he was unable to come up with anything, all he did was smile back. And then all at once the thought of Kristyna came to his aid.

"Lately I've been going with a girl, I mean, a young woman, who is the wife of a butcher."

Goethe liked the idea and laughed a friendly laugh.

"She worships you. She's given me a book of yours for you to autograph."

"Let me have it," said Goethe, and taking the book of his

poems from the student, he opened it to the title page. "Tell me something about her," he went on. "What does she look like? Is she beautiful?"

Face to face with Goethe the student could not lie. He confessed that the butcher's wife was no beauty. Besides, she'd come to Prague in the most ridiculous outfit. She'd walked all over the city wearing a string of beads around her neck and the kind of formal black pumps that had been out of style for ages.

Goethe was sincerely interested. "Wonderful," he said with a tinge of nostalgia.

So the student went even further and admitted that the butcher's wife had one gold tooth that shone in her mouth like a golden fly.

Goethe laughed exuberantly and did the student one better. "Like a solitaire."

"Like a lighthouse," laughed the student.

"Like a star," smiled Goethe.

The butcher's wife was actually a typical small-town product, said the student, but that was what had attracted him to her.

"And well I understand you," said Goethe. "A mismatched outfit, a slightly defective denture, an exquisite mediocrity of the soul—those are the details that make a woman real, alive. The women you see on posters or in fashion magazines—the ones all the women try to imitate nowadays—how can they be attractive? They have no reality of their own; they're just the sum of a set of abstract rules. They aren't born of human bodies; they hatch ready-made from the computers. Let me tell you, my friend, your small-town butcher's wife is the perfect woman for a poet. Congratulations!"

He bent over the title page of the book, took out his pen, and began to write. He was in ecstasy, in a trance, his face glowed with love and understanding. He filled the entire page.

Taking back the book, the student blushed with pride. The words Goethe had written to this woman he did not know were beautiful and sad, nostalgic and sensual, humorous and wise. The student was certain that more beautiful words had never been ad-

dressed to any woman. He ached at the very thought of her. Poetry had cast a cloak of sublime words over her ridiculous street clothes. She had turned into a queen.

## The Poet Descending

The next time the waiter came in, it was without a new bottle. He had come to ask the poets to get ready to leave. The building would be closing in a few minutes, and the janitor was threatening to lock them in and leave them there until morning.

He had to repeat it many times—loudly and softly, to the entire assembly and to each of them individually—before the poets finally realized he was not in fact joking. Petrarch had a sudden vision of his wife in her red negligee and jumped up from the table as if someone had kicked him in the behind.

Suddenly Goethe spoke in a voice of boundless sorrow. "You go ahead. Leave me here. I'll stay here." They looked over at the crutches leaning against the table next to him and tried to talk him into leaving with them, but he just shook his head.

They all knew his wife, a harsh, dour woman; they were all afraid of her. They knew that if Goethe did not come home on schedule, she would make a terrible scene in front of everybody. "Be reasonable, Johann," they begged him. "You've got to go home." And they gingerly clutched him under the arms and tried to lift him out of his chair. But the king of Olympus was heavy and their arms were far from bold. He was at least thirty years their senior and the father of them all, and now that they had to pick him up and hand him his crutches, they all felt uncomfortable and small. Besides, he kept repeating he wanted to stay.

Nobody wanted to let him stay, but Lermontov took advantage of the situation to show how much cleverer he was than the others. "Why not leave him here? I'll watch over him till morning. Don't you see? When he was young, he stayed away from home for weeks on end. All he wants is to bring back his youth! Don't you

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see, you idiots? What do you say, Johann? How about the two of us stretching out on the rug with this bottle of wine and holing up here till morning? The rest of them can go to hell, and Petrarch can go back to his red negligee and flowing blond tresses!"

But Voltaire knew it wasn't a desire to recapture lost youth that kept Goethe from leaving. Goethe was ill, he was not allowed to drink. When he did, his legs refused to carry him. Voltaire took hold of both crutches and told the others to forget their reserve. And so the weak arms of the drunken poets gripped Goethe's armpits and hoisted him off the chair. Then they carried him, or rather dragged him (Goethe's feet sometimes touched the floor, sometimes dangled over it like a child's when its parents swing it back and forth), across the room into the vestibule. But Goethe was heavy and the poets were drunk, so they lowered him to the floor halfway through the vestibule. "Friends," he wailed, "let me die right here, on this spot."

Voltaire lost his temper and shouted at everyone to pick him up again immediately. The poets suddenly felt ashamed of themselves. Some of them took hold of Goethe's arms, others of his legs, and they picked him up and carried him out of the vestibule onto the stairs. They all carried him together. Voltaire carried him, Petrarch carried him, Verlaine carried him, Boccaccio carried him, and even the very unsteady Yesenin held onto Goethe's legs, if only to keep himself from falling.

The student also tried to lend a hand. He knew it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. But he couldn't. Lermontov had become too attached to him. He had a firm grip on his arm and kept finding things to talk to him about.

"Not only do they lack subtlety," he was telling the student, "they can't do anything right. Mama's boys, that's what they are. Look how they're carrying him. They'll drop him for sure. When have they ever worked with their hands? Did you know I once worked in a factory?"

(We must not forget that all heroes of that age and country had put in their time at a factory, either voluntarily—out of revolutionary fervor—or under duress, as a punishment. In either case they were equally proud. They felt that at the factory they had earned

their personal kiss from the noble goddess of the Hard Life.)

Holding him by his arms and legs, the poets carried their patriarch down the stairs. The staircase was square in design. It had many right-angle turns, and turning made special demands on their strength and skill.

"Do you have any idea what it takes to carry beams, my boy?" Lermontov continued. "You've never done it, you're a student. But they haven't either. Look at the rotten job they're doing! He's going to fall!" He turned to them and shouted, "Turn him the other way around, you idiots! He'll fall if you go on like that! Never done a thing with your hands, have you?" And arm in arm with the student, he came slowly down the stairs after the tottering poets, whose anguish grew greater as Goethe grew heavier. Finally they got him out onto the sidewalk and up against a lamppost. Petrarch and Boccaccio kept him from keeling over while Voltaire went out into the street and tried to hail a cab.

"Do you have any idea what you're witnessing?" said Lermontov to the student. "You're just a student, you don't know what life is, but what a fantastic scene! The poet descending. Do you have any idea what a poem it would make?"

In the meantime Goethe had slid to the ground and Petrarch and Boccaccio had propped him back up.

"Look at that, will you?" said Lermontov to the student. "They can't even hold him up their arms are so weak. What do they know about life? 'The Poet Descending.' A magnificent title, don't you think? I've been working on two books lately, two completely different books. One is purely classical in form: rhymes, a clear-cut meter. The second is in free verse. I'm going to call it *Poetic Reports*. The final poem will be 'The Poet Descending,' and a grim poem it will be. Grim, but honest. *Honest*."

That was the third word Lermontov had pronounced in italics. It meant the opposite of everything that was mere ornament and wit. It meant the opposite of Petrarch's dreams and Boccaccio's games. It meant the pathos of labor and a passionate belief in the aforenamed goddess of the Hard Life.

Verlaine, intoxicated by the night air, was standing on the

sidewalk, looking up at the sky and singing. Yesenin had sat down against the wall of the building and fallen asleep. Voltaire, still waving his arm in the street, finally managed to flag down a taxi. He tried to get Petrarch to climb in next to the driver. Petrarch was the only one with a chance of mollifying Mrs. Goethe. But Petrarch put up a frenzied self-defense. "Why me? I'm scared stiff of her!"

"You see?" said Lermontov to the student. "When the time comes to give a friend a hand, he runs the other way. There isn't a single one of them capable of talking to the wife." He leaned into the car. Goethe, Boccaccio, and Voltaire were squeezed together in the back seat. "Friends," he said, "I'm going with you. You can leave Mrs. Goethe to me." And he climbed in next to the driver.

### Petrarch Objects to Boccaccio's Laughter

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Once the poet-laden taxi had disappeared into the distance, the student remembered he'd better be getting back to Kristyna.

"Well, I'll be on my way," he said to Petrarch.

Petrarch nodded, took his arm, and walked off with him in the wrong direction.

"You know, you're very perceptive," he said. "You were the only one in a position to listen to what the others were saying."

"That girl standing in the middle of the room like Joan of Arc with her sword—I could repeat it all, word for word."

"And those winos didn't even let me finish! They're not interested in anything but themselves."

"Or when your wife was afraid the girl was going to kill you and you went up to her and her expression became suffused with heavenly peace. It was like a minor miracle."

"*You're* the poet, my friend. You, not them." Petrarch was taking the student in the direction of his apartment at the other end of the city. "How did it end?" asked the student.

"My wife took pity on her and let her spend the night with us. And you know what happened? My mother-in-law, who sleeps in a

storage room on the other side of the kitchen and gets up very early—when she saw all the windows broken, she went and found some glaziers who happened to be working in the building next door, and all the panes were back in place before we even woke up. There wasn't a trace left of the night before. The whole thing felt like a dream."

"And the girl?" asked the student.

"She slipped out before morning too."

Petrarch stopped abruptly in the middle of the street and gave him an almost hostile look. "You know, friend, I'd be terribly upset if you thought of my story as a Boccaccian anecdote ending up in bed. There's something you must learn. Boccaccio's a real bastard. Boccaccio never understands anybody, because understanding means merging, identifying. That is the secret of poetry. We burn in the woman we adore, we burn in the thought we espouse, we burn in the landscape that moves us."

Listening ardently to Petrarch, the student saw the image of his Kristyna before him. And only hours before he had doubted her. Now he felt ashamed of those doubts. They belonged to the worse (Boccaccian) side of his personality. They were the fruit of his cowardice, not his strength. They made him see how much he feared entering wholly into a love relationship, how much he feared burning in the woman he loved.

"Love is poetry, poetry is love," said Petrarch, and the student promised himself he would love Kristyna with a great and all-consuming love. First Goethe had clothed her in royal vesture, now Petrarch had injected fire into her heart. The night to come would be blessed by both poets.

"Laughter, on the other hand," continued Petrarch, "is an explosion that tears us away from the world and drops us into frigid solitude. A joke is a barrier between man and the world. A joke is an enemy of love and poetry. So let me tell you again—and don't you forget it—Boccaccio doesn't know a thing about love. Love can't be laughable. Love has nothing in common with laughter."

"Yes!" said the student enthusiastically. He saw the world as divided in two: half love, half joke. He knew that he belonged, and would always belong, to Petrarch's army.

## The Angels Hover over the Student's Couch

She had not paced the room nervously, she had not lost her temper, she had not pouted or pined by the open window. She was curled up in her nightgown under his blanket. He woke her with a kiss on the lips, and to quell any reproaches she might have, he quickly went through the events of the unbelievable gathering, at which Boccaccio and Petrarch had locked horns so dramatically and Lermontov had offended all the other poets.

She showed no interest in his account and interrupted him mistrustfully. "I bet you forgot all about the book."

When he handed her the book with Goethe's long dedication, she couldn't believe her eyes. She read those unlikely flights of fancy several times through. They seemed to embody the whole of her equally unlikely adventure with the student: their summer together, their secret walks along unexplored wooded paths, all the delicacy and tenderness that seemed so removed from her life.

Meanwhile the student had undressed and climbed into bed beside her. She clutched him and pressed him to her breast. It was an embrace the likes of which he had never before experienced. It was strong, sincere, fervent, like a mother's, like a sister's, like a friend's—and passionate. Lermontov had repeatedly used the word "honest" that evening, and the student felt there could be no better synthetic term for her embrace, encompassing as it did a myriad of qualifiers.

The student's body told him it was exceptionally well disposed toward making love. It was in such dependable, durable, and firm condition he did not need to rush things and savored the long, sweet, motionless embrace.

First she gave him deep, sensual French kisses, then sisterly pecks all over his face. Fondling her gold tooth with his tongue, he recalled Goethe's words: she didn't hatch ready-made from a computer, she was born of a human body! She was a woman for a poet!

He felt like shouting for joy. Then he went over Petrarch's statement about how love was poetry and poetry love and understanding meant merging with one's partner and burning in her. (Yes, all three poets were there with him, hovering over his bed like angels—singing, rejoicing, and granting him their blessings.) By now the student was so overflowing with emotion that the time had come to move on from the Lermontovian honesty of a motionless embrace to the act of love itself. He turned over onto Kristyna's body and tried to spread her legs with his knees.

But what's this? Kristyna resists! She presses her legs together with the same obstinacy as on their summer walks in the woods!

He wanted to ask her why, but couldn't bring himself to speak. Kristyna was so shy, so delicate, that the workings of love lost their names in her presence. The only language he dared use was the language of breathing and touching. Weren't they beyond cumbersome words? Wasn't he burning in her? Weren't they burning with a single flame? And so over and over in obstinate silence he tried forcing his knee between her tightly closed thighs.

She was silent too, she too was afraid to speak; she preferred making her position clear by means of kisses and caresses. But when he tried prying apart her thighs for the twenty-fifth time—a particularly brutal attempt—she came out with, "No, please don't. It would kill me."

"What?" he said, breathing deeply.

"It would kill me. Really. It would kill me," she repeated, giving him another deep kiss and pressing her thighs together tightly.

The student felt a mixture of despair and bliss. On the one hand, he felt a wild need to make love to her; on the other, he could cry for joy at the thought that she loved him as no one had ever loved him. She loved him so much she could die; she loved him so much she was afraid to make love to him; if she did, she would never be able to live without him, she would die of longing and desire. He was happy, blissfully happy. Suddenly, unexpectedly, undeservedly, he had attained all he had ever wished for—that boundless love

compared to which the entire earth with all its waters and all its dry land is as nothing.

"I understand. I feel just the same!" he whispered to her, stroking and kissing her, almost weeping with love. But all these tender emotions did nothing to gratify his physical desire, which was becoming painful, nearly unbearable. So he kept trying to insert his knee between her thighs and clear a path through to her genitals, more mysterious to him at that moment than the Holy Grail.

"No you don't. Not you; it won't happen to you. I'm the one it will kill!" said Kristyna.

He imagined a sensual pleasure so boundless as to kill him, and whispering "We'll die together! Let's die together!" over and over, he persisted in his unsuccessful attempts to force open her thighs with his knee.

They had nothing more to say. All they could do was cling to one another, she shaking her head and he storming the fortress of her thighs. In the end, he capitulated and submissively turned over on his back next to her. Instantly she seized the scepter of his love, upright in her honor, and squeezed it with all her splendid honesty: strongly, sincerely, fervently, like a mother, like a sister, like a friend—and passionately.

The student felt both the bliss of boundless love and the despair of a body rejected. The butcher's wife did not let go of his weapon, but rather than make the few simple motions that would simulate the physical act he so longed for, she held it in her hand like something rare, something precious, something to be preserved, kept stiff and hard for a long, long time.

But enough of that night, which lasted without substantial change almost until morning.

## The Sordid Light of Morning

Since they did not fall asleep until late, they did not wake up until noon. They both had headaches. They didn't have much time left together because Kristyna's train was leaving shortly. They didn't speak. Kristyna packed her nightgown and Goethe's book into her bag, and put on her impossible black pumps and her impossible necklace.

As if the sordid light of morning had broken the seal of silence and a day of prose had followed on the night of poetry, Kristyna told the student quite matter-of-factly, "I hope you're not angry about last night. It really *could* have killed me. The doctor told me after my first child that I should never get pregnant again."

"Do you really think I would have made you pregnant?" asked the student with a desperate look in his eye. "What do you take me for?"

"That's what they all say. Always so sure of themselves. I know what happens to my girlfriends. The young ones like you are the most dangerous. And when it happens, that's it."

He told her with desperation in his voice that he'd had plenty of experience and would never have given her a child. "You're not going to put me in the same category as the small fry your friends run around with, are you?"

"I guess you're right," she said almost apologetically. The student had made his point. She believed him. He was no country bumpkin and probably knew the ways of love better than all the mechanics in the world. Maybe she had been wrong to put up so much resistance. But she wasn't sorry she had. A quick roll in the hay (Kristyna could not picture physical love as anything but hurried and short) was nice enough, but it could be dangerous and might make her feel unfaithful. The night she'd had with the student was infinitely better.

Even while they were on their way to the station, she was

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looking forward to sitting in her compartment and running it over in her mind. With the down-to-earth egotism of a simple woman she kept telling herself she had experienced something that "no one could take from her": she had spent the night with a boy who had always seemed unreal, elusive, distant, and had held him the whole night through by his upright member. Yes, all night! Now there's something she'd never experienced before! She might never see him again, but she'd never really expected to go on seeing him. She was happy to have at least one permanent thing to remember him by: Goethe's book with that unbelievable dedication, proof positive that her adventure had not been a dream.

The student, on the other hand, was in despair. If only he had said one sensible sentence, if only he had called a spade a spade, he could have had her. She was afraid he would get her pregnant, and he thought she was frightened by the boundless horizons of their love! Peering deep into the abyss of his stupidity, he felt like screaming with laughter—tearful, hysterical laughter.

He wends his way from the station to his loveless wasteland, with *litost*, frustration, at his side.

### Further Notes for a Theory of *Litost*

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I have used two incidents from the life of the student to illustrate the two basic reactions we may have to our own *litost*. Should our counterpart prove weaker than ourselves, we merely insult him under false pretenses, just as the student insulted his girlfriend when she swam too fast.

Should our counterpart prove stronger, we are forced to choose a circuitous route—the backhanded slap, murder by means of suicide. The little boy plays out of tune so long that the teacher can't stand it anymore and throws him out the window. And as the boy falls, during his flight, he rejoices in the thought that the mean old teacher will be accused of murder.

These are the two classic reactions, and if the former occurs

most commonly among couples, married or unmarried, the latter is a main ingredient of what we call the history of mankind. Everything our teachers once called heroism may well be nothing more than the form of *litost* I have illustrated with the example of the young boy and his violin teacher. The Persians conquer the Peloponnesus, and the Spartans make one tactical error after another. Just as the little boy refuses to play in tune, they refuse to take reasonable action; blinded by tears of rage, they can neither fight more efficiently nor surrender nor take to their heels and run. They let spite—*litost*—kill them to a man.

It occurs to me in this connection that it is no accident the concept of *litost* first saw the light of day in Bohemia. The history of the Czechs—a history of never-ending revolts against stronger enemies, a history of glorious defeats setting the course of world history in motion but causing the downfall of its own people—is the history of *litost*. When in August of the year 1968 thousands of Russian tanks occupied this small, wonderful country, I saw the following example of graffiti on the walls of one of its towns: *We Do Not Want Compromise, We Want Victory*. You must understand that by this time the only choice was among several varieties of defeat, but the town in question rejected compromise and would settle for nothing but victory. That was not reason talking; that was the voice of *litost!* Rejecting compromise means *ipso facto* choosing the worst of defeats, but that is exactly what *litost* is after. A man obsessed with *litost* revenges himself by destroying himself. The little boy was smashed to smithereens on the sidewalk, but his immortal soul will eternally rejoice in the fact that the teacher hanged himself from the hasp of the open window.

But how can the student hurt Kristyna? She is safely on the train before he can do anything. Theoreticians are acquainted with this phenomenon and call it “impacted *litost*.”

Nothing can be worse. The student’s *litost*, his disillusionment, was like a tumor growing minute by minute, and he did not know how to treat it. Since he could not take revenge, he hoped at least for consolation. That was what made him think of Lermontov. He remembered how Goethe had insulted him, how Voltaire had

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humiliated him, and how Lermontov had shouted over and over that he had his pride, as if all the poets around the table were violin teachers and he was trying to provoke them to throw him out the window.

The student needed Lermontov’s fraternal support. He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and felt a large piece of folded paper. It was a sheet torn from a notebook with the message “I’m waiting. I love you. Kristyna. Midnight.”

He put two and two together. The jacket he was wearing had been hanging in his room yesterday. The belated message only went to confirm what he already knew. He had lost Kristyna’s body because of his own stupidity. He was filled to bursting with his *litost*, and had nowhere to release it.

### In the Depths of Despair

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It was late afternoon, and the student assumed the poets had slept off the effects of the drinking bout and would be at the Writers’ Club. He ran up the stairs and past the cloakroom, then headed to the right, toward the restaurant. Because he was still new there, he stopped at the entrance, looking around uneasily. At the other end of the room he saw Petrarch and Lermontov sitting with two people he did not know. There was an empty table nearby, and he went and took a seat at it. Nobody paid any attention to him. He even had the feeling that Petrarch and Lermontov had glanced over without recognizing him. Waiting for his cognac, he painfully ran the infinitely sad and infinitely beautiful text of Kristyna’s message through his head. “I’m waiting. I love you. Kristyna. Midnight.”

He sipped at the cognac a full twenty minutes, but the sight of Petrarch and Lermontov not only failed to comfort him, it made him even sadder. Everyone had abandoned him—Kristyna and the poets. All he had left was a large sheet of paper with “I’m waiting. I love you. Kristyna. Midnight” on it. He felt like standing and waving it high over his head so everyone could see, so everyone could