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PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS
THE COWARDS


Josef Škvorecký was born in 1924 at Nachod. He studied English and philosophy at the Charles University in Prague, taking his degree in 1951. He worked as a teacher, a publisher's editor, and as editor of the *Svetova literatura* (World Literature) monthly, but is now a freelance writer. He is an accomplished translator of English and American fiction. His own works include *The Cowards* (1958); *The Eموke Legend* (1963); *The Seven-Branched Candelabra* (1964); *From the Life of the Upper Crust* (1965); *Reflections of a Detective Story Reader* (1965); *The Sorrows of Lieutenant Boruvka* (1966); *The Babylonian Affair and Other Stories* (1967); *The End of the Nylon Age* (1968); *The Tank Regiment and The Lion Cub* (1969); *All the Bright Young Men and Women: A Personal History of the Czech Cinema* (1977); and *The Bass Saxophone* (1978). Josef Škvorecký now lives in Canada.

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THE COWARDS



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To Zdena, the girl I met in Prague

The British edition of this book is dedicated to
all my friends to whom the old Latin saying,
Donec ecriis felix ... does not apply.

Author's Preface

A human being, like everything else in the world, develops and changes, and that is why I believe it is impossible to revise a novel written fifteen years ago. I wrote *The Cowards* when I was twenty-four years old, so it has all the imperfections and shortcomings of youth. But I am afraid that what the critics wrote after the first edition appeared had nothing to do with the actual shortcomings of the novel but stemmed rather from a number of misunderstandings. Specifically, they charged that the novel was an offence against concepts sacred to the Czech and Slovak people and that it caricatures and insults the Red Army. It is common knowledge, however, that certain concepts which are expressed by the words 'homeland' and 'revolution', for instance, have one meaning for the bourgeoisie and another for Marxists. The heroes of *The Cowards*, who come from bourgeois homes but who are at the same time in revolt against the world of their bourgeois fathers, use these words ironically and derisively, yet still with the same limited, bourgeois meaning, simply because they know no other. The rehabilitation of 'sacred' concepts was a matter for the future and for other social classes and this is not what *The Cowards* is about. Danny and his friends do not insult the revolution, but mock the way the bourgeoisie play at making one.

As far as offending the Red Army is concerned, I think this is a misunderstanding, a classic example of the clash, so frequent in Czechoslovakia in the past, between two aesthetic-philosophical outlooks, two ways of thinking, two views of the function of literature. Symbolically speaking, it is an encounter between Babel and Babayevsky, between the painting and the poster. I have come to the conclusion that if we have real respect for something, we express it best in art by absolute realism, 'harsh' realism, if you like. And I don't think that realism means polishing to parade-ground lustre the boots of an

army fighting tooth and nail or pouring eau de cologne over its sweaty grubby soldiers. I refuse to argue with those critics who objected to the fact that the Soviet soldiers and POWs represented in the novel are, for the most part, people whom Danny refers to as 'Mongolians'. I'm not a racist.

I have made a few revisions in the text of this edition in order to avoid these and similar misunderstandings in this book, which makes no claim to being an objective history but is instead an analytic novel about the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of a member of the Czech provincial 'golden youth' at a time of world-shaking historical events. These revisions do not, of course, imply any change in my own opinions or in Danny's outlook on the world or an act of obedience, etc. Most of these changes were made simply to point up the fundamental ideas which the passages in question originally expressed but which might not have been clear enough because of excessive brevity or provocative stylization.

The Cowards remains just as it was when it was written in 1948-9. I hope that, aside from its juvenile mistakes and shortcomings, the book also reflects the candid, impertinent, Hans Christian Andersen-truths of youth which many of us so persistently overlook on our pilgrimage to the grave.

December, 1963

Josef Skvorecký

[*See Notes following text.]

'Any work of art that lives was created out of the very substance of its times. The artist did not build it himself. The work describes the sufferings, loves and dreams of his friends.'

- ROMAIN ROLLAND

'A writer's job is to tell the truth.'

- ERNEST HEMINGWAY

'There was a revolution simmering in Chicago, led by a gang of pink-cheeked high school kids. These rebels in plus-fours, huddled on a bandstand instead of a soap-box, passed out riffs instead of handbills, but the effect was the same. Their jazz was a collectively improvised nosethumbing at all pillars of all communities, one big syncopated Bronx cheer for the righteous, squares everywhere. Jazz was the only language they could find to preach their fire-eating message. These upstart small-fries ... started hatching their plots way out in ... a well-to-do suburb where all the days were Sabbaths, a sleepy-time neighborhood big as a yawn and just about as lively, loaded with shade-trees and clipped lawns and a groggy-eyed population that never came out of its coma except to turn over ... They wanted to blast every highminded citizen clear out of his easy chair with their yarddog growls and gully-low howls.'

MILTON 'MEZZ' MEZZROW

Friday, May 4, 1945

We were all sitting over at the Port Arthur and Benno said, 'Well, it looks like the revolution's been postponed for a while.'

'Yes,' I said and stuck the reed in my mouth. 'For technical reasons, right?' The bamboo reed tasted good, as it always did. One of the reasons I played tenor was because I liked to suck on the reed. But that's not the only reason. When you play it makes such a nice buzzing noise. It reverberates inside your skull, good and solid and rounded and high class. It's a great feeling, playing a tenor sax. Which is another reason why I played it.

Benno took off his hat and hung it on the rack above Helena. He put his trumpet case on the table and took out his horn. 'That's it, for technical reasons,' he said. 'They don't have enough guns or enough guts and there're still too many Germans around.'

'Anyway, it's crazy,' said Fonda. 'We should all be glad things are going as well as they have so far.'

'Except they're not going all that well,' said Benno.

'What do you mean?'

Benno raised his eyebrows, stuck the mouthpiece into his trumpet, and pressed it against those thick Habsburg lips of his. Fonda watched him, his mouth half open, and waited. Benno blew into the trumpet and pressed the valves. He raised his eyebrows even higher and didn't say a word. He wanted to keep Fonda in suspense. Fonda was always getting worked up over something. It didn't take much to get a rise out of Fonda.

'What do you mean?' he kept on. 'Has there been any trouble?'

Benno blew a long note and it sounded hard and very sure, so I stopped worrying about him losing his tone while he was in the concentration camp. He hadn't. He definitely hadn't lost it. Just from that one note you could tell he hadn't.

'There was a fight over in Chodov yesterday,' he said, and unscrewed one of the valves.

'What happened?'

'Somebody got tight and hung out the Czech flag and then people tried to make the Germans give up their guns.' Benno spat on the valve and stuck it back in.

'And what happened?' Fonda persisted.

'The Germans didn't cooperate.'

'Anybody get hurt?' asked Haryk.

'Yes,' said Benno laconically.

'How many?'

'About four.'

'How do you know?'

'Pop was there this morning with Sabata.'

'And what's going on over there now?'

'Everything's quiet. Everybody's cooled off.'

'Are the Germans still there?'

'They are.'

'Hell,' said Haryk. 'What did you mean anyway when you said what you did before?'

'About what?'

'About the revolution being postponed.'

'Well, old man Weiss wanted to stage an uprising today. He had it all arranged with people in Chodov and Rohnice but when the trouble started up in Chodov ahead of schedule, they decided to forget it.'

'How do you know, for Chrissake?' said Fonda.

'Also from Pop. Pop's on some kind of national committee or something.'

'Don't believe him,' said Helena. 'He's just trying to get you all worked up. Now sit down like a good boy and play, Benny!'

Benno picked up his trumpet and went over to sit down. Old Winter shuffled in from the taproom and set a glass of pink soda pop down in front of Helena.

'Hey,' said Lucie, 'don't you have any lime soda?'

'I'll be right with you,' said Winter, and slowly shuffled back to the tap. He had three rolls of fat at the back of his neck and his seat sagged. He reminded me of an elephant - I don't know

whether it was male or female - I saw in a circus once. It kept tramping around the ring, its behind hanging down, limp and deflated, just like old Winter's. Josef Winter said his old man had progressive paralysis, but then he was mad at him because his old man wouldn't give him any money and only grumbled about Josef's loafing around all the time and never doing anything. Even if he did have progressive paralysis, I don't know whether that would have any connection with his pants. Anyway, it was only an idea. Kind of a dumb idea, the kind a person has subconsciously. Because inside, people are dirty dogs. Everybody. The only difference is some people try to hide it and others don't bother. The door opened and Jindra Kotyk came into the Port.

'Hello,' he said, and started off to pick up his bass fiddle which he kept in the Winters' bedroom.

'About time,' said Fonda.

'I couldn't get here any sooner. Boy, did all hell ever break loose at our place today!'

'Where?'

'At the factory.'

'Huh?' said Haryk.

'At Messerschmidt. At the factory.'

'You mean you went to work today?' said Haryk.

'Well, what's wrong with ...'

'Man, you're dumb,' said Fonda.

'What'd you want me to do?'

'Well, certainly not make a fool of yourself,' said Haryk. 'What's the point in showing up for work at the factory any more?'

Mrs Winter appeared in the kitchen door with the bass fiddle. This saved Jindra just when he'd worked himself into a pretty tight spot.

'Thanks,' he said and ducked behind his fiddle. He pretended he was tuning up but that wasn't very shrewd of him since everybody knew he wasn't. He couldn't. He didn't know how. The fact was he was just a sort of stopgap since we hadn't been able to find another bass player. To be more exact, we hadn't even been able to round up a bass, so when Jindra bought one

we were glad to at least have somebody propping up a bass behind us when we appeared in public. The only trouble was we had to let him play it, too. Otherwise he wouldn't let us use his fiddle at all. So we chalked some marks up under the wires so the sounds he did make wouldn't be too far off and in time he actually learned to plunk away pretty well. He even had a red-hot solo in one number. All that saved it from being a complete fiasco was the terrific energy he brought to his playing. All you could hear were those wires, which he plucked like mad, snapping away against the neck; applause usually covered up the sour notes. Jindra was very proud of his solo and called his technique the 'Jan Hammer style' - after the Czech swing-bassist - and we let him call it whatever he wanted to. It would have been stupid to cross him up, since his old man owned a dry-goods store and had some pull with City Hall and the Germans, which came in handy when we were trying to get an engagement.

'Oh God!' said Haryk. 'Hitler's dead and he still goes off to work.'

'Well, it just so happens things at the factory have been very interesting these past few days.'

'Interesting? I beg your pardon?'

Jindra took advantage of the opening. Now he could talk away and cover up the bad impression he'd made. I looked at him and saw him tightening up the key on the bass, pretending to be listening for the pitch but meanwhile saying casually, 'There was a riot at Messerschmidt. The workers stopped work and asked for a raise.'

'Oh God!' said Haryk again. 'Hitler's dead, the Reich's going up in smoke, and all the Messerschmidt workers think about is trying to get a raise.'

'They were just trying to raise hell. But the biggest joke is that it was Bartosik who led the whole strike.'

'Who's that?'

'You don't know him? Herr Bartosik from the pay office.'

'Oh, him. You mean those idiots let themselves be led by a collaborator like him?'

'Yes,' said Jindra, and that was all. He stopped tuning his bass

and flipped open the sheet music in front of him. We were all watching him. From the way he'd said it you could tell there was more to it than that. He waited a little while till the room got quiet, and when it was he went on.

'They let him lead 'em. But only up to Fenik's office, and then they grabbed both of 'em and locked 'em up in the basement.'

'Jesus!' said Haryk. 'I'm beginning to develop a healthy respect for the working class.'

'You should have seen it! Especially the look on Bartosik's face when they locked him up. You can't imagine...'

'Oh yes I can. Because I was around when he made a bad mistake like that once before,' said Benno.

'When?'

'When he found out I was going to be shipped off to a concentration camp for racial reasons.'

We laughed, and Jindra laughed loudest. He had good reason to. He could be glad to get let off as easy as he had been after acting like such an eager beaver. Imagine, working in a German aircraft plant in Kostelec on the Fourth of May, 1945. Benno started off on a Bob Cats solo, softly, just for himself, and we turned to our parts, too. Before they shipped him off to the camp, Benno had been Bartosik's secretary. I can just imagine how surprised Mr Bartosik must have been when he found out he'd had a half-Jew working for him in such a responsible position. And when he remembered all those half days he'd let Benno goof off! I stuck my saxophone in my mouth and hummed into it the opening bars of the first chorus of 'Annie Laurie'. At the next desk Haryk opened up 'Annie Laurie' too, except on his score he'd written 'Lucie'. 'Annie Lucie.' Old Winter pried himself loose from the tap and brought over some green soda pop on a tray. He shuffled over to the table by the window and set it down in front of Lucie. Lucie took a straw, tore off the wrapper, and dipped the straw into the soda pop. Then she bent over the glass and started to sip. She sat there in her nice thin dress, with her golden hair, sipping the emerald-coloured soda pop through which shone the setting sun. She was awfully pretty. I thought about Irena

and wondered what she was doing. But I knew. I was pretty sure I knew what she was doing. Zdenek hadn't been going to the factory for a long time so it was pretty clear what he was up to also. Benno sounded off behind me, playing his rough, big, beautiful pre-concentration camp solo from 'St James Infirmary'. I looked out the window and there hung the dusky silhouette of the castle and the sky was all red and orange with little clouds and clear patches and the first tiny stars. Lights glimmered in the castle windows. The big shots were probably putting their heads together. About how to make themselves scarce, most likely. The place was crawling with them. They'd come here from all over the Reich and now things were closing in on them from all sides and there they sat in their plush-upholstered rooms like in a trap. There was something kind of poignant about it. Kostelec was right in the middle of Europe, so they'd all gathered here. I guess they thought they could still save their skins somehow or other. One of that bunch was a queen of Württemberg - Ema, the housekeeper's daughter up at the castle, had pointed her out to me - and she was very good looking. I wasn't interested in her though. Falling in love with her would have been like falling in love with Deanna Durbin or something. The only way I could ever get her would be to take her by force when everything fell apart. But the thought of taking somebody by force when everything fell apart didn't appeal to me. As a matter of fact, I've never felt like taking anybody by force ever. The only thing was that this Queen of Württemberg was pretty and I've always had a soft spot for a pretty woman. I didn't have much faith in spiritual beauty. It's all right for people to have a soft spot for pretty girls, because that's only natural and it would be crazy to deny it. That's just our nature. Anyway I was convinced that Fonda Cemelik had a crush on the Queen of Württemberg, too, even though he said he didn't and that he couldn't care less about her, because she really was awfully good looking. Prettier than Irena - I had to admit it objectively. Except that I was in love with Irena, and Fonda had all sorts of prejudices and moral scruples. Something anyway. And all I felt for the Württemberg queen was sympathy. Nothing else.

Fonda rapped on the piano lid. 'Okay, let's tune up,' he said. He gave us A and we tuned up. Meanwhile I went on thinking about the Queen of Württemberg. Fonda didn't waste any time on Jindra but he was very strict with the rest of us. He had absolute pitch and sometimes really made a show of it. Venca was sweating from the way Fonda kept nagging at him. He made Venca slide his trombone all the way out but still it didn't sound right. When I finally told him the horn couldn't possibly still be off pitch, Fonda insisted there must have been a slip-up somewhere when the thing was made, or that the heat must have done things to it, but that nobody could question the fact that he had a perfect sense of pitch. Anyway, we were all on pitch at last and then quieted down. Fonda rapped four times on the top of Winter's upright piano and we began to play. Lexa wailed shrilly in the highest register of his clarinet, Venca sank down to the explosive depths of his trombone to build up the bass, and I was playing around with some fancy little flourishes in the middle range, while Benno came out above us with his rough, dirty, sobbing tones that sounded like they came from heaven. I started thinking about the Queen of Württemberg again, and about how good it was that there were beautiful girls in this world. It seemed only right there should be. I thought that here was this queen with a fancy family tree and ancestors and all kinds of class prejudices, but no kingdom to rule over, and that she could never, for instance, think of marrying me even if I wanted to marry her, but then it struck me maybe she would, now, because I was a Czech and she was a German and maybe my look-out was a lot better than hers even if I didn't have any ancestors or prejudices like hers, but then I realized yes I did have ancestors, in fact just as many as she had, and I remembered those monogenetic and polygenetic theories I'd been reading about a while before and I remembered Forester Bauman who'd somehow found out that our family is actually an offshoot of the Smirickys of Smirice and if he was right, I thought, then I could marry the Württemberg queen after all, except suddenly I thought maybe an English lady might be a whole lot better when the war was over and with me coming from such a

distinguished family, and while I was thinking all these things over we went right on playing without a break. The idea that there might be a revolution or that we would see front line action didn't even occur to me. And when it was time for me to start off on my solo, I thought to myself, you fool, Irena's the only woman you've got and the only one you love and she's better than all the others and more important than anything else in the whole world, and I started thinking about dying a hero's death and how that would really impress Irena and how wonderful it must be to die a hero's death, except that she would have to get to know about all the details and I was positive then that I was in love with Irena because it was so wonderful to feel so positive that I was.

When we'd finished the piece, Benno said, 'I sure missed that in Schlausen, and that's a fact.'

'I'll bet you did,' said Fonda. 'Only you came in half a bar too late on your solo.'

'Like hell I did,' said Benno.

'Well, you did. It's supposed to go like this: tadlladadataaaa,' Fonda sang out, waving a finger and tapping his foot and bobbing that curly little head of his on top of his long neck. Fonda was infallible. Every note was right on pitch and it had an authoritative sound.

'Yeah?' said Benno, humbled. Then he lifted his trumpet to his lips, played the opening bars, and looked at Fonda.

'No,' said Fonda and sang it out once again. Benno repeated it. It was just right this time. I expected Fonda to find something wrong with my playing, too, but he didn't.

All he said was, 'We'll take it from the top,' then waited for us to quiet down, rapped, and we started in again. In those days we didn't dare improvise very much and just went by the score. We had a great band though. Better than anything for miles around, that's for sure. We played Bob Crosby-style Dixieland very well. The only trouble was in the bass. Fortunately, though, the bass played so softly that it didn't make much difference. I'd memorized my part. I just closed my eyes and fingered the keys on my sax, thinking how nice it would be to start daydreaming again, as usual, since dreaming's been a

habit with me for as long as I can remember. Ever since ninth grade, to be exact. That's when I fell in love with Judy Garland and that's when it all began. I thought about myself and about her, but mainly about myself, and I thought how things would be *if*. And usually the thoughts themselves were so wonderful that they were enough for me. Sometimes I even thought it was probably better just to think about something than to actually live through it in real life, at least in some ways. So I started daydreaming again. It was really a wonderful feeling to sit there playing a piece of music that had practically become a part of your own body and at the same time to be daydreaming with your eyes closed. The syncopated rhythms echoed through my skull and I thought about Irena, or rather about myself, how much I loved her and how wonderful it would be to be with her, and how it was really better to be with her this way than for real and not know what to say or what to do. This way I didn't have to say anything at all, or just say something and then listen to how it sounded in my imagination and not to think about anything particular, just about Irena in general. There was supposed to be a revolution coming up and it was nice to think about that, too. And have your last will and testament all written up, like I did. Saying that I'd never loved anybody in my life except Irena and that all I wanted in the world was for her to know, as she read these lines, that everything I'd done and gone through was important only because it had all been in some way connected with her, that I'd lived and died only for her and that I'd loved her. The best part of the whole thing was the past tense. But the rest was pretty good, too. That part about 'these lines' and how I'd 'never loved anyone else in my life' and that 'I don't want anything in the world'. Words like that - 'world' and 'life' - sounded great. They were impressive. And when I thought about it honestly, it was a good thing, too, that I was in love with Irena and that she was going with Zdenek and maybe I was better off just daydreaming and writing testimonials to my love. Of course it would have been nice, too, if I'd been going with her myself. Everything was nice. Absolutely everything. Actually, there wasn't anything bad in the whole wide world.

'Benno,' said Lexa when we'd finished, 'come on, tell the truth. You practised while you were in the concentration camp, didn't you? Your blues sound like Armstrong.'

'It was the bedbugs. They really bothered me,' said Benno.

'Honest? There were bedbugs?'

'What did you think, man? The place was crawling with them.'

'Why, Benny's still scared of them,' said Helena.

'Scared stiff,' said Benno.

'Where at?' said Lexa.

Helena raised her eyebrows and pretended she hadn't heard.

'He practically takes the bed apart every night before he goes to sleep. Why, he even leaves the light on all night long.'

'Why?' I said.

'Bedbugs are scared of light,' said Benno.

'Really?'

'Sure. A simple trick like that's enough for them. As long as the light's on they don't come out. They're awfully dumb.'

'They sure are,' said Lexa.

'Except in camp we weren't allowed to keep the lights on and that was rough. Bedbugs leave some people alone, but I was all chewed up by morning.'

'Well, they had plenty to work on with you,' said Lexa.

Benno didn't say anything.

'You put on a little weight while you were away, Benny,' said Haryk.

'Maybe he had pull with the camp boss,' said Lexa.

'Yeah,' said Benno. 'I had to shine his boots every morning and pull 'em off for him every night.'

'No kidding.'

'Sure. Man, it was like something out of *Good Soldier Schweik*.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, I'd always stick out my ass...'

'Benny!' said Helena.

'What's wrong?'

'You know I don't like you to talk dirty.'

'But, honey...'

'No, I won't stand for it. One more dirty word out of you and I'm going home.'

'But ass isn't such a dirty word.'

'I'm going,' said Helena, and got up. Benno jumped up and rushed after her. He waddled, he was so fat and lazy, and his white shirt stuck to his back.

'But, baby,' he said.

'No, I told you not to use dirty words and you said it again.'

'Aw, come on, baby!'

'No. Good-bye.'

We all watched the scene with interest and I stopped day-dreaming. Benno was completely under Helena's thumb. Hen-pecked. A classic example. I couldn't understand it. She could make him do absolutely anything. He trotted behind her and the folds of his sticky shirt quivered.

'Aw, baby!' he implored in a frightened whine. He ran up and grabbed her hand.

'Leave me alone,' she said.

'But, honey, where you going?'

'Home.'

'Why?'

'Because you said a dirty word.'

'But I didn't say anything!'

'Yes, you did. Don't deny it.'

'But it wasn't *that* bad.'

'No. I said you weren't supposed to use words like that. You know I don't like it.'

'Aw, come on, baby!'

'Leave me alone! Let go of me!'

'Don't be mad at me.'

'Let go!'

'Helena, please, don't be mad at me!'

'I said let go of me!'

'Come on, baby! Please! Stay here.'

Helena stopped pulling away. You could see how she led him around by the nose. He had a soft heart, like they say all fat people have. I don't know whether it's true in all cases but

Benno anyway sure had one helluva soft heart. Helena looked sulky.

'Apologize!' she said.

'Helena, please excuse me,' he muttered in a fast whisper. We were all listening, fascinated.

'Promise you won't ever say any more dirty words.'

'I'll never say any more dirty words again.'

'Not one!'

'Not one dirty word.'

'No, the whole thing!'

'Huh?'

'Say the whole thing.'

'Again?'

'Uh huh.'

'But, baby...'

'Benny!'

'But, baby...'

'Well, are you going to say it or aren't you?'

'But, baby, I just said it!'

'Are you going to say it or aren't you?'

I couldn't understand how he could be so dumb. Not dumb in general, just dumb with her.

'I'll never say a single dirty word again.'

'And apologize.'

'Helena, please excuse me and I'll never say a single dirty word again,' he said quickly and softly to get it over with. He was annihilated.

'All right, now go and play,' said Helena and sat down. He turned and obediently trudged back to his place. We acted as though nothing had happened. I picked up my sax from the stand and slung the cord around my neck.

'Let's go. What'll it be now?' I said.

'Wait a minute,' said Fonda. 'What's the story about taking off those boots?'

'Yeah. What happened, Benno?' said Lexa.

Benno picked up his trumpet. 'Well, I always had to stick out my rear and grab his leg between my knees and he pushed against my rear with his other foot until I pulled off his boot.'

'I see,' said Lexa. 'Yeah, I know what you mean.'

'Let's play, gang. Let's get going,' I said again.

'Okay,' said Fonda. 'Get out the "Bob Cats".'

There was a shuffling of paper as the boys hunted for 'Bob Cats'. I found it right away, and as I shifted around in my chair to get comfortable I noticed the way Lucie was making eyes at Haryk. She had pretty eyes. The green soda pop in front of her still sparkled like emeralds, and behind her the sky outside was blood red and the windows in the castle glittered. A whole row was lit up on the first floor, where the ballroom named after Piccolomini was, and then two or three windows on the second floor. The big shots were probably starting to panic. A little star twinkled right over the turret of the castle. Fonda rapped four times, Brynych started off on a drum solo. We waited till it was over and then we all came in, Venca with a wonderful, gutty glissando sliding up and down the scale and Lexa's heart-breaking moan. It was good. We hit it just right. I saw a smile spread over Fonda's face. Then I started thinking about Benno. It was funny, I knew, but this was something I couldn't and probably never would understand. Allowing yourself to be roped up and led around and humiliated like that, losing control over yourself that way. I've never lost control of myself. I could never get so mad at anybody that I'd really blow my top, and love never made me lose my head either. When I had my arms around some girl and was jabbering away, I had to act as though I was talking like that out of sheer ecstasy and excitement and all that kind of thing. I really could have talked pretty sensibly, only that probably would have made her mad, and so I'd always talk a lot of nonsense. I had to act like I was completely gone on her and that she took my breath away and so on, and at the same time I always had an embarrassing feeling that girls could see right through my act and that they were laughing at me. But none of them ever really saw through it. They asked for it. Probably everybody talks that way in such situations, so it doesn't seem funny to girls. Only it was hard to imagine a guy really meaning what he said. God knows. Certainly none of the girls ever found out. Probably boys really are smarter than girls. All of a sudden it occurred to

me that I ought to be thinking about Irena if I was supposed to be in love with her. So I started thinking about her. At first I couldn't. I tried to picture her and I couldn't. So then I remembered how I'd looked down her bosom at the swimming pool recently and then it worked. I thought about how nice it would be to sleep with her and that Zdenek was sleeping with her and I started to be pleasantly jealous and that was fine. Then it was my turn for the tenor solo and I started to gulp away in the middle registers where the tenor sax sounds best and I forgot all about Irena, but she was still there in the back of my mind while I played my big solo from 'Bob Cats'. My nice big solo and I felt fine. I didn't even mind that there was probably going to be a revolution and that it wouldn't be so nice to really get hurt or killed. Instead, it was nice to think about my Last Will and Testament and heroism and things like that. When I finished my solo, I looked up and noticed old Winter sitting behind the tap staring into nowhere with those bloodshot eyes of his. He had dull eyes that wobbled in a watery kind of way and he was daydreaming just like me, except not about Irena but probably about the station restaurant he'd wanted to lease ever since he'd been a kid like us, or about some big hotel with four waiters, or maybe just getting hold of some real good Scotch and selling it to us. He didn't drink himself, maybe just to be different or something, or maybe he really did have progressive paralysis. His bald head glistened behind the taps and the brass pipes gleamed. Outside the windows the blood-red glow darkened and the stars began to shine. We finished 'Bob Cats' by heart, playing it in the dark.

'Helena, turn on the lights over there, will you?' said Fonda when we'd finished. Helena reached up above her head, felt along the wall for a minute, then found the switch. The bulb in the ceiling came on and the way things looked surprised us all. All of a sudden you could see everything clearly. I noticed Lucie's mouth, how red it was in the electric light, and how dark it had got outside the windows. Haryk started strumming some kind of bouncy, romantic improvisation on the guitar and he grinned over at Lucie. I leafed through the sheet music.

'I saw Uippelt from Messerschmidt today,' said Haryk, 'heading out of town on his bike as fast as he could go.'

'What about his old lady?'

'I don't know. He was all by himself.'

'Anyway, it's funny he stuck around here so long since everybody knows him and the kind of bastard he is,' said Lexa.

'You should have pushed him off his bike and grabbed it,' said Fonda.

'Very clever. And then he pulls out a gun and kills me, right?'

'Don't forget, there's a revolution going on,' said Lexa.

Benno called out from the back, 'That's been postponed until further notice.'

'You really think anything's going to happen?' asked Fonda.

'Why, sure.' Lexa spoke with an authoritative tone because the Germans had executed his father. Since then, he always knew more than we did. But as far as this was concerned, I knew more than he did.

'No,' said Benno. 'You don't think our city fathers can do anything, do you?'

'Well, wait and see.'

'I'll have to wait a long time then. They're all scared shitless. The revolution's simply going to be put off indefinitely, that's all.'

I looked over at Helena, but she didn't say anything. She was reading the paper.

I said, 'No, not the city fathers. You'll see, though. Something's going to happen.'

'And Chief of Police Rimbalnik's going to run the whole show I suppose?'

'Not him. You just wait.'

'You talk as if you were mixed up in something,' said Haryk.

I laughed. I was glad the boys didn't know what was going on. They didn't believe me because they weren't in on anything themselves but they weren't sure whether maybe I wasn't. I wasn't in very deep but at least I knew a little bit. I knew about something, but wasn't too sure myself what it really

added up to. I'd found out about it from Prema and wasn't supposed to tell anybody.

'Oh, come on, kid, don't act so mysterious,' said Benno.

I didn't feel like acting mysterious because that was silly. Even though the others didn't know anything, they still knew enough to realize that anything I was mixed up with couldn't be anything very earthshaking. So for a while I just kind of played like I was somebody who's in on a secret, and then I told what I knew. Prema had told me, and he was in contact with Perlik who'd been arrested by the Gestapo a month ago. He must have known something. It couldn't have been much, though, because probably nobody knew much. Anyway, the whole thing was just being improvised. But I didn't care and I was glad to get it off my chest and it made me seem important and if nothing finally came of the whole affair, the boys would forget about it.

'All I know,' I said, 'is that something's supposed to start when Radio Prague stops broadcasting.'

'Where'd you hear that?'

I shrugged.

'I know it.'

'Come on. Who told you?'

'Look, I had to promise I wouldn't tell, but you just wait and see.'

'Don't tell me you guys really think something's going to happen?' said Fonda.

'Well, what d'you think?'

'Nothing's going to happen. Anyway, the Germans are done for - finished.'

I laughed. I agreed with him but I had to laugh because it wouldn't have looked right for me to agree with him now. I was supposed to be mixed up in something and I had to want something to happen. Besides, I didn't have any objections to it. It opened up all those different possibilities as far as Irena was concerned. Heroism. And Zdenek getting killed maybe. Yes, I realized, he could get killed. That would be better than if I got killed, though there was something to be said for that, too. But I didn't mean it seriously. Not now, because now I wasn't day-

dreaming. It opened up a whole new perspective that, this way, I could get rid of Zdenek very effectively. If he was killed, I'd be glad to go to visit his grave with Irena. Irena would feel that was very noble of me and I'd be very gentle and understanding so as not to awaken any painful memories in her. I'd go visit his grave with her absolutely unselfishly. With Zdenek out of the picture, I'd be extremely unselfish. So I didn't have anything against an uprising. But that was the only good reason I could see for fighting for any patriotic or strategic reasons. The Germans had already lost the war anyway, so it didn't make any sense. It was only because of Irena that I wanted to get into it. To show off. That's all. So when Fonda said the Germans were already finished, I laughed as if I thought they were anything but.

'No, listen. I mean, what's the point?' Fonda persisted.

'I'm not saying what the point of it all is. I'm just telling you what I know,' I said.

'Well, anyhow, there'll be a lot of laughs,' said Haryk and he winked at Lucie again. She sat there with her elbows propped on the table and the straw between her lips, sipping her soda pop. When Haryk grinned at her, she squinted up her eyes. Boy, were they in tune. It got under my skin.

'It'll be a laugh, all right, the day Pop closes the store and starts out after the Germans with his squirrel gun,' said Benno.

'And when old Cemelik leads the attack on the high school,' said Haryk.

'Has your old man had his uniform cleaned already?' asked Lexa.

'You bet,' said Fonda. 'And the moths had really done a job on it.'

'Where?'

'On the ass,' said Lexa.

'Lexa!' bleated Haryk so he sounded exactly like Helena.

'What?'

'You know you're not supposed to talk dirty.'

'But, honey ...'

'All right, boys. That's enough of that!' screamed Helena.

'Apologize!' continued Haryk.

'Helena, ple ... ple ... please forgive me,' Lexa stuttered and Helena kept yelling, 'Now you quit that right now or I'm going home!'

'Aw, honey,' said Lexa. Helena rose, turned, and opened the door. Then she left without a word. There was a clatter behind me as if somebody had knocked over a music stand and then Benno's voice.

'Helena! Wait! Where you going?' Benno bumped into me from behind as he hurried towards the door with that waddling gait of his. His white shirt glimmered in the dark hallway and then he disappeared after Helena.

'Well, he's really in for it now,' said Lexa and laughed.

'Jesus, Benno's dumb,' said Haryk.

'I'll say. And she sure does make the most of it.'

'If only she was worth it.'

'She hasn't got a brain in her head,' said Lexa.

'Oh,' said Fonda, 'she's not all that bad.'

'Jee-sus,' said Haryk.

'Well, she's got a nice face anyway.'

'Her ass is better,' said Haryk.

'Haryk! Remember, Lucie's here,' said Lexa.

I looked over at Lucie.

'I'm used to it,' she said.

'Used to a foulmouth like Haryk? That's saying a lot, if you ask me,' said Lexa.

'Look who's talking,' said Haryk.

That was the way they usually talked. They never meant it seriously – just thought that kind of talk was very witty, and maybe it was. In reality, I mean. Books and novels always bubble with wit and sparkling repartee but in real life there's nothing very witty. Usually all it amounts to is a kind of teasing, the way boys and girls tease each other when they're together, though boys do it even among themselves. I don't know whether girls talk that way among themselves, too, but boys do. Because if you can't at least get each other all worked up by talking, then there really wouldn't be anything to talk about if nothing special happens to be going on right then – like at a

dance, for instance – or you don't have anything really urgent to say. There wouldn't be any point in talking all that junk you talk about at dances if it weren't for the fun of teasing. Between boys and girls it's as natural as the day is long. Talking is probably about the same for them as sniffing is for dogs – and that's the honest truth, nothing dirty or exaggerated about it. I know it and I think everybody else does too, except not everybody admits it. I do. Boys say all sorts of things and crack all sorts of corny jokes just so finally they can kiss their girls out in the hall. That's true, at least as far as boys talking with girls is concerned. And it's certainly true when boys talk among themselves in front of a girl. Maybe it isn't always like that when they're by themselves but then boys usually talk about girls when they're by themselves, so even then it's true, too. So that's probably how it is with witty talk in general.

Then Benno appeared in the doorway with Helena. He was looking as deflated as before and Helena sat down, looking peeved.

'Let's finish up early today. I've got to get back home,' he said.

'How come?' said Lexa.

'I've got to take a bath.'

'First time since you got back from concentration camp, huh?'

'Aw, no. You ought to know Benny better than that,' said Fonda.

'Shut up. Let's go through "Riverside" again, then I'm taking off.'

'Aw, don't be silly.'

'I've got to.'

'Well, you don't have to get so mad about it.'

'What the hell? I'm not mad. I've just got to go home, that's all.'

'Take it easy on him. I'm going home early too,' I said.

'How come? Helena got you wrapped around her little finger, too?' quipped Lexa.

'Not Helena, Irena,' said Haryk.

'Okay,' I said calmly. 'Let's play, shall we?' I didn't mind

Haryk saying what he did because in general I didn't mind if the boys knew about it. I'd got so I didn't mind anything that had to do with Irena, I was so crazy about her. Fonda rapped on the piano.

'All right, "Riverside" then. And Venca, watch out so you don't louse up the beginning again.'

'Don't worry,' said Venca and emptied out his trombone. I looked into my sax and saw a little puddle shining at the bottom. The bigger the puddle, the more fun it was to empty it out.

'Ready?' demanded Fonda.

'Ready,' said Benno.

Fonda rapped slowly and the brush on the cymbals led into 'Riverside Blues'. Old Winter was dozing behind the counter and white drops trickled down from the tap into the mug underneath. Helena was browsing through another newspaper, bored. Music bored her, but she liked being married to the best trumpet player in the county so she stuck it out. Some old geezer stood planted in the doorway with a half pint of beer in his hand, staring at us. I could read his mind. His eyes looked like two bugles and he had a mouth like a tuba. He certainly didn't think the stuff we were producing was music. We didn't either, really. Not *just* music. For us it was something more like the world. Like before Christ and after Christ. I couldn't even remember what it had been like before jazz. I was probably interested in soccer or something - like our fathers who used to go to the stadium every Sunday and shout themselves hoarse. I wasn't much more than a kind of miniature dad myself then. A dad shrunk down to about four foot five. And then along came Benno with his records and jazz and the first experiments in Benno's house with a trumpet, piano, an old xylophone I'd dug up in the attic and two violins that Lexa and Haryk were learning to play because their parents wanted them to. And then Jimmy Lunceford and Chick Webb. And Louis Armstrong. And Bob Crosby. And then everything else was After Jazz. So that it really wasn't just music at all. But that old geezer over there couldn't understand that. He'd been ruined a long time ago by soccer and beer and brass band music. Hopelessly

ruined and for all time. But Lucie wasn't ruined, sitting there over what was left of her soda pop, her tanned legs gleaming underneath her skirt, one knee crossed over the other, and I remembered the greatest joke I'd ever thought up in my life, when I asked her to kiss me in the Petrin hall of mirrors so it would be like a thousand kisses all at once, and I began to regret I'd ever thrown her over, but then I realized it hadn't been me at all but her who'd thrown me over, though I still had hopes there, plenty of hopes, and then my conscience bothered me that I wasn't thinking about Irena so I started thinking about her and I joined in on the lament with everybody else and we wound up 'Riverside' like we never had before. Like we never had about twenty times before.

When we'd finished, Helena got up and said, 'Let's go, Benny.'

'Sure, right away, Helena,' said Benno and put away his music.

Fonda got up. 'All right, that's all. Boys, we're going to play for a dance down at the spa any day now.'

'You already lined it up?' asked Haryk.

'Yes. Medilek's cleaned up the outdoor dance floor so we can go any day now.'

'Great. That means money, men,' said Venca.

'That's right. Millions,' said Haryk, and put his guitar in the case.

I got up and unscrewed the top of the saxophone. Then I tipped it over on one side where there aren't any valves on the bottom and poured the puddle out on the floor. I put in the brush and twirled the tenor elegantly in my hand. The weight dropped out through the narrow end and I had a good feeling as I slowly pulled the brush up through the saxophone. Then I put it into the case, took the head, pulled out the mouthpiece and cleaned it with a wire. I unscrewed the reed, dried it, and wiped off the bakelite mouthpiece. Then I put everything into the case, locked it, and put on my coat. Everybody else was ready. There was always more work with a saxophone. I went over to old man Winter and paid my bill. All I'd had was one beer. With his drowsy eyes, old Winter got up behind the

counter and gave me back fifty German pfennigs change. That reminded me of the revolution. 'Good night,' I called after the others into the May night.

It was warm and starry, and as I came out into the darkness I was sort of blinded. At first all I could see against the greyish black of the night mist hanging over the town was a bunch of dark silhouettes. The windows of the castle still glittered on the other side of the valley. They weren't paying any attention to the blackout. The dark figures in front of the Port Arthur were saying good-bye. 'So long,' I said and tagged along with Benno's short fat figure and Helena's female form. The others headed left towards the hospital. We were the only ones who went down towards the woods and around the brewery and over the bridge to the other side of the river where Benno's house was. It was quiet. Our footsteps beat a three-part rhythm on the pavement and we didn't talk. The silence was like before a storm. But maybe that was because I knew what was probably going to happen. Otherwise it was an ordinary kind of silence. We went past Dr Stras's villa where German officers were quartered. The main gate was open; the Germans had probably already left. It's always like that. The big brass clears out leaving the poor soldiers holding the bag. They'd made a field hospital out of the hotel on the square and there the wounded lay or hobbled around, sick and full of lice and pus. But Herr Regierungskommissar Kühl wasn't around any more. He'd had a five-room apartment in the hotel until not long ago. And now God knows where he was. He left the whole job up in the air. The town was without a ruling military commander. Wounded Wehrmacht soldiers were hanging around dejectedly in Kühl's apartment, which he'd generously turned over to the wounded. Everywhere it was quiet. People were holed up at home, waiting. An ordinary kind of silence. It was only the fact that I knew what was going to happen before very long that made this silence seem like the silence before a storm. We reached the brewery and turned left, down towards the bridge. It arched gently over the river and the bulging paving stones glimmered whitely. Beyond it the road ran straight to the railroad station. A red light shone at the crossing. The huge smoke-

stack of the power station stood out against the phosphorescent sky.

'Wait a minute, boys,' said Helena, and she stopped. We stood there in the middle of the bridge. Helena leaned against the railing and we leaned over, too, on either side of her. I looked down. Beneath us the tranquil river flowed and you could feel how its dark surface was moving silently. The woods on the right were low and dark and the trees on the shore dipped their lower branches in the water. It was quiet. I strained my ears, but couldn't hear a thing. If you listened carefully, you could sometimes hear shooting from the front. On Black Mountain you could even hear the heavy machine guns sometimes. Now, though, I couldn't hear a thing. Just quiet. And that absolutely inaudible and subconscious rushing of the river underneath the bridge. Benno sighed.

'Oh Jesus,' he said and spat over the side of the bridge. The big white blob fell downward like a woman in a white veil committing suicide and splattered on the surface of the water.

'What's wrong, Benny?' said Helena.

'I don't feel good. I've got a fever.'

'Let me feel,' she said, touching his forehead. 'No, you don't.'

'I do, too.'

'No, you don't. You're just imagining things again.'

'No, I'm not. I got it from the camp.'

'Well, come on, then. You'd better lie down.'

'Wait,' said Benno, and he was silent for a moment. 'I just feel sort of stupid and sad.'

'But why, Benny? Everything's going to be all right soon.'

'Yeah, I know. But I still feel lousy.'

Helena didn't say anything. She just reached over and took Benno's hand. I stood beside her and all of a sudden it was as if there were only two people standing there next to each other. Oh, I knew why Benno felt sad. I did, too. I hadn't ten minutes before, but now I did. It wasn't a terrible kind of sadness, like Benno's maybe, because he'd been in a concentration camp and half his relatives had died there, but just sad because of the river and those poor German clods with their skulls all bandaged up in the hotel, and because of the front which was get-

ting closer and which was already senseless, and because of the woods and the little stars and everything. And because of Irena. Mainly because of Irena. And because now all of a sudden something was ending, something big and long, six years long, something which wouldn't ever happen again. I looked across at Irena's house on the other side of the river. I could see her window through the leaves on the tree that grew in front of her house and the light was on. She was probably reading or necking with Zdenek. I felt a terrific yearning to kiss somebody, too. And I was sad. Beside me, Benno and Helena were cooing to each other and I was standing there next to them, alone and melancholy and all too aware of how lonely I was. So what? What the hell. Maybe nobody understands me and that's why I'm alone. Maybe I really can't love anybody. Not in the dumb way Benno loved Helena. I remembered them all, Vera and Eva and Jarka and Irena, and it was as though I'd never loved any of them. I'd forgotten what being in love with them felt like. All I could remember were all kinds of problems and difficulties and embarrassing feelings. That was all. Maybe I wasn't made for it. It would have been nice to know that there was at least one girl in the world who wouldn't leave me feeling like that. Just one. I had a saxophone and I'd been on the honour roll in my senior year and my father had influence and everybody figured I had it good and that I was satisfied. I wasn't, though I had lots of success with old ladies. I talked politics with them over the tea cups. Boy, did I ever talk. And I was awfully mature and sensible for my age. And at home I wrote sentimental Last Will and Testaments for Irena and I wanted to love her and I'd held on to this feeling that I loved her for a long time. But I couldn't always and for ever. And then I felt sad. Maybe it really would be better if I got knocked off in this revolution. I worked up a big ball of spit in my mouth and leaned over the railing. I let it go slowly and watched it fall. It fell straight because there wasn't any wind. It grew rapidly smaller and disappeared in the dark. All you could hear was a faint splat. The river below rushed on quietly and evenly. I looked at the couple beside me. They stood there with their arms around each other's waists and their heads

together, watching the river. Suddenly I was above them. Superior to them. Well, all right. What did they have anyway with their hugging and cooing and bothering the life out of each other? I was alone and free. Wonderfully free. And the revolution was approaching and I could hardly wait for it. And then later I'd go away. To Prague and to foreign countries and who knows where. But then it all collapsed inside me. Go away to what? And what would I do there? Live. Yes, just live. Look around at things and eat and fall in love with lots of girls. Yes. Well, yes, then. Well, all right, why not? It's interesting enough, living. Better than getting knocked off in some revolution. The river rippled and hummed and it was warm and dark. I stood up straighter. 'Well,' I said, 'let's go.'

'Sure,' said Benno and we started off. Our steps echoed in the darkness. We went past the County Office Building and the sound of our footsteps boomed through the arcade.

'Are you coming over tomorrow?' Benno asked me.

'I don't know. It all depends.'

'You really think something's going to happen tomorrow?'

'I don't know. Maybe.'

'Listen, what do you really know?'

'Oh, nothing.'

'Don't play dumb with me. Come on, tell me.'

'But if ... it's kind of hard.'

'Tell us, Danny,' said Helena.

'But really, I don't know anything.'

'What was that you said about the radio then?'

'What radio?'

'About Radio Prague stopping broadcasting.'

'Oh well, yeah. I heard something like that.'

'What?'

'Well, just that Prague's supposed to stop broadcasting and that that's supposed to be the sign it's going to begin.'

'Where? Here, too?'

'I don't know. Maybe just in Prague. I don't know.'

'Who told you?'

'Some kid, that's all.'

'Listen, I'm scared those kids are up to some kind of trouble.'

'How do you mean?'

'It's always the same gang, isn't it? Skocdopole and Vaha and Perlik and Benda – that whole crowd, right?'

'I don't know. Well, maybe.'

'Don't kid me. You know what they're up to all right.'

'No, I don't. Honest.'

'But you're always hanging around with Skocdopole.'

'Yeah, but he never tells me anything.'

'Still, you know more than you're letting on you do.'

'I do not. They're up to something but Prema won't tell me what, and I'm not going to pump him if he doesn't want to tell me himself, am I?'

'But they are planning to do something.'

'Could be. But I don't know what.'

'They're nuts. A bunch of idiots like that'll mess around and all they'll do is get the Germans mad and then we'll all be in the shit.'

'Benny!' whispered Helena.

'Well, it's the truth. Dad's the same way. They're nuts. He and Dr Sabata and old Cemelik are planning an uprising.'

'With Sabata?'

'Yeah.'

'Who else is in on it?'

'I don't know for sure. Major Weiss and Krocan – the one that owns the factory – and Jirka Krocan and Dr Bohadlo and people like that.'

'Boy, I wonder what they're going to do.'

'All I hope is that they'll wait till the Germans have all cleared out.'

'And what if the communists won't wait that long?' I said.

Benno looked up with a jerk. 'Hey, you do know some thing.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, what's this about the communists?'

'Nothing. All I know is that they're getting something ready too.'

'And Skocdopole and the others are in with them?'

'With the communists?'

'Yeah.'

'No.'

'So what are they up to?'

'They've got something else. They're probably hooked up with London or something.'

'And how ... what are their connections with the communists?'

'I don't know. All I know is that they're each doing it on their own.'

'And the communists have their orders?'

'Sure, I guess so anyway.'

'Then we're in for it.'

'In for what?'

'You'll see. The communists want a revolution and so we all get dragged into the shit heap.'

'You're not afraid, are you?'

'Afraid? No. I'm just fed up.'

'Don't argue like that, Benny,' said Helena.

'We're not arguing,' I said.

'Maybe not. But Benny's using dirty words again.'

'Don't blame him for that, Helena. We're all talking dirty these days. It's nerves.'

'Yes, nerves!'

'What a future to look forward to!' said Benno. 'If our old men don't louse it up, then Skocdopole and his gang will, and if they don't, then the communists certainly will. Either way, we've got something to look forward to.'

'Benno, go to bed and sleep it off,' I said. I knew how he felt and I should have pitied him, only I couldn't. I knew he'd been in a concentration camp and so he had good reason for being scared of shooting and dying and things like that. He'd seen death and I hadn't. So I acted like I would have acted if I'd felt sorry for him – out of respect for his nerves.

'Yes, Benny,' said Helena. 'Come on and get some sleep. You're worn out.'

'I won't be able to sleep anyway.'

'Sure you will. I'll give you a sleeping pill.'

'I'm so goddamn fed up!'

'Benny! Don't swear!'

'I mean it, Helena. You hardly get to sit down for a minute and these fools start ruining everything.'

'Oh, Benno,' I said, 'nothing's going to happen. They can't do a thing.'

'I hope to God they can't.'

'Not a chance. There's nothing to worry about. I know them.'

'Idiots.'

'Sure.'

'Let's go,' snapped Benno suddenly. 'So long.'

'Good night. Sleep tight,' I said.

'Good night, Danny,' said Helena.

'Good night.'

They turned and hurried past the County Office Building towards Benno's family's house. They were arm in arm and they were hurrying. I watched them go. The Manes's place was in the middle of a garden and the tall-windowed drawing-room shone luxuriously into the night. They weren't paying any attention to the blackout either. I knew that Eva and Mr and Mrs Manes were sitting there, digesting their supper. There were wonderful paintings on the wall, a Persian rug on the floor, and everybody had his own room. Benno and Eva and all the others. It was a huge two-story mansion with a drawing room and veranda and a salon and a music room with potted palms. So Mr Manes, export-import, was going to stage a revolution, too. Besides his business, all he cared about was Freud. And he knew how to live. He called himself a liberal. He was an Aryan but he looked like a Jew. His wife was kind and generous. She was Jewish and, besides Benno, there was also a very pretty daughter.

I watched the two of them until they disappeared through the garden gate. Then I turned around and headed towards the station.

I was all alone on the sidewalk now, not a soul in sight. On the left the park lay quiet and I would have bet anything that tonight there wasn't a single person in it, though it was a fine night for a stroll. Everybody, every family with all its little

daughters, was getting ready to creep down in the cellar and stay there until it was all over. They were all imagining the craziest kinds of things. About the Russians and raping and so on. Goebbels had seen to that. If they catch you, you're done for. People joked about it at the grocery store and in all the shops, but deep down inside they were scared. So, in their different ways, people were getting ready and, just to be on the safe side, stitching together red flags out of old feather-bed ticking. Fathers were plotting in their offices and boys were hatching conspiracies in the taverns and back rooms. And dreaming of being heroes. Just like me.

I walked past a block of apartment houses that stretched all the way down to the railroad station. Dagmar Dreslerova lived in the last house. My refuge in distress. I'd been crazy about her when I was a sophomore and then I wasn't any more. But she was pretty and I didn't like thinking that maybe she wasn't crazy about me any more either. So every once in a while when I was feeling low on account of Irena, I'd visit Dagmar and tell her I loved her just so I could hear her tell me how much she loved me. Then, too, I felt kind of sorry for her because I wasn't in love with her any more. She'd taken it very hard when I broke off with her. Then she started going with Franta Kocandrl but he must have given her a rough time. And she was giving a rough time to Rosta Pitterman, who was in love with her in spite of the fact that she couldn't care less about him. She was ready to throw Franta over any time I wanted her to, but I didn't take much advantage of the situation. My conscience bothered me. Not because it would hurt Franta but because I was mixing Dagmar up, getting her mentally and morally all snarled up and doing all sorts of things with her which I didn't really enjoy at all any more. I just didn't have the heart to disappoint her if it meant so much to her. I felt sorry for her, so I tried to give her pleasure. Sometimes I took refuge in Dagmar when I'd convinced myself I'd had enough of Irena, but that hardly ever happened. It was rare that I felt I couldn't take it any more. But when I did, I went to see Dagmar to make that feeling stand out even sharper, as if I needed consolation, and I consoled myself with

Dagmar as well as I could so the feeling wouldn't go away too soon. All the factory owners were getting ready for the liberation. There wasn't any light on in Dagmar's room. She probably gone to bed early with her unfortunate crush on him. So was Chief of Police Rimbalnik, who wore white gloves and lived at the Kaldouns's. The town was in good hands. We and was probably feeling damn good about it, too. An unhappy love affair ought to make her glad. I would have been glad if I had one. But, to tell the truth, I was feeling pretty satisfied. I got to our house and took my key out of my pocket. Out of a habit, I looked up at the sky again and then at the outline of the castle. It was already dark up there and only the stars were shining. I stood in the doorway and felt around for the key-being hungry. Or being shut up inside the Messerschmidt plan. I stuck the key in and unlocked the door. I didn't turn on shortly before the end-of-the-shift whistle blew. I crossed the light. I always went upstairs in the dark. It was nicer that tracks and looked around the station. The trains weren't running. You could daydream and practically fall asleep on the ning any more. A row of freight cars fixed up so people could live in them stood on a siding. It was a munitions train and I dragged my saxophone case along in the other. It was dark and guarded by a couple of Vlasov men with submachine guns on the first floor. There was a light under the door on the It had got stuck here because the partisans had torn up the second floor.

I went up as far as our balcony and felt like taking a look up, shuffling slowly along the line of cars – a submachine gun around outside again. I set the case down on the floor and slung across his shoulder, a cigarette gleaming like a glow opened the balcony door. I went out and leaned over the iron worm under his nose. I shifted my sax case to my other hand railing. It was just a thin railing and I always got a pleasantly and turned left along Jirasek Boulevard. The Messerschmidt threatening sense of insecurity when I leaned against it, hanging plant lay on one side, dark and quiet. Only stars were reflected in thin air above the town. As I leaned there against the in the glass roof over the assembly department. Not even the railing, the balcony disappeared and there I was, dangling in little night light was on. The blue-painted glass shone under the space. Down below me was the courtyard. I looked down and starry sky. I'd spent a lot of time in there, too. A year and saw Bonza, the dog, looking up at me. I mewed. Bonza barked. half of drudgery and boredom. Mainly boredom because He watched me and couldn't figure out what was going on. He barked suspiciously and inquisitively; I reached in my pocket and felt a piece of roll left over from lunch. I threw it down to Bonza. It made a dull *bonk* when it hit the concrete. Bonza quieted down right away. I looked out over the town. It lay in a valley, dark and quiet, the steeple of the Czech Brethren Church rising up over the little houses around it and only here and there a lone window gleaming. The lights were still on at the Port Arthur. I could imagine old Winter sitting there behind the counter with his drowsy eyes while beside him the beer tap dripped, slowly and steadily. And it was already quarter past eleven. I couldn't imagine a life like that. Sitting beside the tap every day and most of the night. Maybe he didn't even sleep in bed. It was unimaginable. Bonza barked again

from down below. I reached in my pocket and felt a little box of the peppermint drops I sometimes suck on account of my breath. I took one out and pitched it down to Bonza. He stopped barking and snuffled around trying to find it. I looked out over the town again. Beyond it, the woods started up the side of the hill and out of the woods rose the bare peak of Black Mountain with the hotel on top. Now it was dark. I remembered those long Sunday afternoons we used to kill up there during the war, playing cards and billiards and drinking tea. That was all over now. All that was over now. Something new was beginning now. I tipped my head back and looked up at the wide sky that was swollen with stars. The Milky Way stretched across it and didn't move. A foamy spring-time silence hung over the town. It didn't look like there was going to be a revolution. But there was supposed to be a revolution. And there had to be one. A lot of people wanted a revolution. A lot of important people, too. And a lot of these had bad records that needed cleaning up fast. A revolution would be very handy for them. I could already see how Mr Machacek would write it up: *The History of the Kostelec Revolution*. 'Dedicated to the Honourable Dr Sabata, Mayor of Kostelec' and it'd be published by B. Minarik who owned one of the bookstores in Kostelec. He'll write it and peddle it around, and Mr Kaldoun and Mr Krocan and Mr Moutelik will tuck it away in their bookcases alongside the collected works of Master Alois Jirasek* and next to the memorial volume put out in honour of the ninetieth birthday of Mr Josef Sepron-Domanin, the Czech industrialist. And they'll read it, but mostly just the parts that mention them. And they'll be in there. Everybody will be. Mr Machacek won't forget anybody. Mr Kaldoun was gracious enough to donate the use of his warehouse for a first-aid station, he'll write. And Mrs Krocanova and Mrs Moutelikova made soup for the partisans. Mr Machacek will write about everything. Everything accurate and in great detail so the truth will be preserved for all posterity. About how Mrs Krocanova made soup for the partisans. Well, anyway, it'll be good to have it preserved for all posterity. At least posterity'll have something to laugh about.

Bonza barked again from down below. He was starting to get on my nerves. You dumb mutt, I thought, all you care about is something to eat. I turned around and went off the balcony. I closed the door, picked up my saxophone case, and went up the last flight of stairs to our apartment. It was dark under the door. I unlocked it and went in. I didn't turn on the light in the hall so I wouldn't wake up my father and mother. But Mother probably wasn't asleep anyway. She always waited up until I came in and then fell asleep. Often she didn't even fall asleep then. She suffered from high blood pressure and insomnia. I felt sorry for her. Once, when I committed sabotage by mistake and was scared the Gestapo would come for me, I suddenly realized that I loved her. She was the only person I really loved. Otherwise I more or less always acted like I loved people, but I really did love Mother. Except she was always around and so I often forgot about her. I could hear Father softly snoring in the bedroom. I hung my hat on the rack and looked at myself in the dark mirror. I could see my silhouette. I always looked in the mirror when I came home at night. Sometimes, when I turned on the light, I looked handsome and aristocratic in the mirror. That was because of the way the light shone on me from above. I had a long face and hollow – but not too hollow – cheeks and a straight nose and eyes with shadows underneath and a nice mouth. I used to imagine myself on the movie screen. With Judy Garland. But that was a long time ago. Now I couldn't imagine myself like that any more. Only the habit still stuck with me, looking at myself in the mirror at night. I tiptoed across the carpet to my room, shut the door behind me, and set the case on the floor. Then I groped along in front of me until I felt the upright piano. Irena's picture stood on top. Before, Vera's picture used to stand there, and before that Lucie's. And before that Dagmar Dreslerova's. I always had to have somebody's picture on the piano. I touched the cool metal of the lamp and turned the switch. A sickly light seeped over the room. That was because I had a 220-volt bulb in the lamp which was too strong for the current in our house. I had the impression the light couldn't spread around the room as far as it should. The wardrobe and the table by the radio were almost

in the dark. I turned to the bed. It was made up and a pair of carefully folded pyjamas lay on the sheet. Just like my mother. I shoved the case under the bed and sat down. I felt tired. I pulled off my shoes, first one and then the other, untied my necktie and took off my shirt. Then I took off my pants, then my shorts and socks. I sat down on the bed naked. It felt good. I lay down on my back and put my feet up on the eiderdown quilt folded up at the foot of the bed. I lay there naked and the pillow and the sheet felt cool and good against my back. I gazed down at myself. I didn't look so bad with nothing on. I had a well-proportioned body and chest and slim hips. Without any athlete around to compare myself with, I looked almost Grecian. The way the lamp was shining on me from behind, a shadow fell on my hips and suddenly I had those sharp angles around the pelvis like the statue by Praxiteles, whatever it is called. Those angles always looked unnatural and out of proportion to me but now I saw them there on my own body. I lifted one leg and stretched it out. It was nice to be tired. I lay there for a while, then sat up and put on my pyjamas. I turned off the light and pulled the quilt up over me. Everything was quiet. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, I said to myself, and started to say my prayers. Dear God, make Irena care for me so she'll marry me and I can live with her happily ever after. That's what I'm praying for, Lord - that more than anything else in the world. I recited Our Father Who Art and thought about Benno and Helena and Kaldoun and Machacek and old man Winter and Bonza and the revolution and about everything, and then I realized that I wasn't saying my prayers in a very reverent way and so I said the Lord's Prayer over again and tried to think about God, but I couldn't unless I pictured him sitting on his throne in whiskers and a nightshirt. And then I said Hail Mary and that went better because I've always thought of the Virgin Mary as being very beautiful and sweet until you get to the part about Jesus, and then I bowed my head and imagined her together with Irena, Irena standing in front of the Virgin, wearing a white veil and carrying a bunch of lilies in her hand and smiling at me. When I finished that I repeated Dear Lord, please help me to make Irena care