

'Well, so that proves that what they said in the newspapers is true after all, that's what.'

'You mean about the Russians stealing?'

'Stealing – and for instance in Moravia they're already confiscating private property.'

'Crap,' I said.

'And this? These things?'

'Nothing to get all steamed up about, that's for sure.'

'Well, and just think what's going to happen when they're here. You thought about that?'

'Oh, Jirka, don't be crazy.'

'Crazy? I'm not crazy. I'd rather be out of here when they all march in, that's all.'

'Well, but what'd you expect? They're soldiers, aren't they? After what they have to go through day after day, you think they're going to worry about some dumb bug-eyed civilian losing a wrist watch? That's the spoils of war, right? You think English soldiers don't steal? Or the Americans maybe?'

'But...'

'Anyway, he probably took it from an SS man in the first place. They're coming straight in from Germany now. And who the hell knows? Maybe that SS man killed the Russian's wife somewhere in Russia a year or two ago.'

'Not very likely. The Russian I found these things on can't be more than eighteen.'

'Well, some other Russian's wife, then. It's all the same thing.'

Jirka shook his head. 'I still don't like it,' he said.

'Oh, for Chrissake, don't make such a big tragedy out of a couple of stupid little watches!' I said. What made me even madder was that I realized I didn't know what was going to happen either. Still, this whole thing was ridiculous. Idiotic. Wrist watches! As though everything that had already happened and was still going to happen had anything to do with a stinking little wrist watch.

'So some Kraut's going to have to look up at a church clock instead of at his wrist, for Chrissake, so what?' I said. 'Worse things can happen to a person.'

Jirka stuck the watches back into the Russian's pants pocket. 'I'm still not so sure. So long.'

'So long,' I said, and without another word Jirka started off down the dimly-lit corridor. They were carrying somebody out through the door on a stretcher and you could see Dr Preisner in a white cap, the front of his gown dotted with bloodstains. Two more casualties were taken into the operating room. The Englishman was shoved right up next to the door. A nurse hurried out and knelt beside the stretcher.

'Now, where does it hurt you?' she asked him.

The Englishman shook his head.

'He's English,' I said. The nurse glanced up at me; she looked scared. I shifted my machine gun around to my back.

'I'll translate for you,' I said. She nodded with a little smile and I asked him in English where it hurt.

'I don't know. I can't move my arms,' he said hoarsely.

'He can't move his arms,' I said.

'I see,' said the nurse. 'Can you help me undress him?'

'Certainly,' I said. The nurse lifted the Englishman and, while he held him up, deftly stripped off his jacket, then unbuttoned and took off his shirt revealing his broad chest. A tin tag hanging from a chain around his neck lay half hidden in the hair on his chest. Under each shoulder was a small bloody hole.

'There. You see?' said the nurse.

'Yes,' I said, and bent over the Englishman. 'Probably from a machine gun. One right after the other.'

'Next,' called Dr Capek. The two bearers lifted the Englishman's stretcher and carried him into the operating room. I went in after them. Dr Capek looked me up and down – an unfriendly look.

'You can't...' he said.

'I'm an interpreter,' I broke in, 'in case you need to ask him anything.'

'I speak Russian,' said Dr Capek.

'He's English.'

'English?' Dr Capek raised his eyebrows. 'All right, come on,' he said, and turned, and when he turned I noticed that the



buttons on the back of his operating gown were buttoned up wrong. There were two operating tables with bright lamps hanging down over them. Dr Preisner was working at one; a nurse stood over at the patient's head, letting something drip on to the mask tied over the man's face. Dr Preisner was amputating the man's hand at the wrist. The instrument nurse stood on the other side of the operating table silently handing him the instruments. I looked back at the empty table. The bearers set the stretcher down and two nuns lifted the Englishman up on the operating table. Dr Capek leaned over him.

'Hmm,' he said. 'Just under the shoulder bone. Both shots. Sit him up.'

The nurses propped him up. There were two identical holes in the Englishman's back, one on each side.

'Let's take a look at this,' said Dr Capek, and held out his hand. The nurse gave him some sort of instrument through which the doctor closely scanned the Englishman's chest. It must have been some sort of manual X-ray or something. First he looked at one side, then the other. Then he set the X-ray down and said, 'He's lucky. They're both clean wounds.'

'I'm glad,' I said. Dr Capek looked at me and waited. 'Is there anything else I can do, Doctor?'

'I don't think so. Thank you,' he said.

'Well, good-bye,' I said, and left the operating room and plodded down the hall where the patients, silent and stunned, stared at me from the doors of their rooms. I walked out onto the damp pavement of the driveway in front of the hospital and there the western horizon spread out before me its brilliant colours and small puffball clouds. The sun was already setting; the air was cool and fresh after the rain. I took a deep breath. From far off came the tough stutter of a machine gun. I pricked up my ears. From somewhere beyond town came the faint rumble of a tank. Then there was the clear blast of a cannon. Then another. A pair of machine guns started chattering simultaneously. Quite a racket for a spring evening like this, even though it came from pretty far off. Guns boomed again.

I looked out across the town, then turned into the street the

Port Arthur's on. It was quiet and the street was dim and unlit, but the sound of gunfire around the frontier went on. Another machine gun started hammering away. There were pauses and then it would start up again and each time it sounded louder. I started to run. The wind felt cool against my face and I felt strong and dangerous. I sprinted past the Port Arthur and down towards the brewery with only the noise of gunfire and my own footsteps to keep me company. Above the woods, off to the east, the sky had already darkened; the tops of the tall oaks and lindens swayed in the glow of the setting sun. A couple of people were running down the path to the brewery. I looked across the bridge towards the station and could see dark figures running in opposite directions. Shots flashed and cracked around the station. I turned and set off again for the brewery. I held my submachine gun in both hands and, jogging along, heard the whiz of more bullets. When I got to the gate I slowed down. Inside, in the yard, it was a sea of confusion. Crowds of men and guys my age, some with guns, some without, were milling around and I saw a couple of guys making their way up and over the fence out back by the woods. On the driveway, a little man in uniform was trying to line up a bewildered corps of young riflemen. The chestnut trees blocked the sun; the brewery yard lay in shadow. Major Weiss, capless and wearing a civilian topcoat, raced by. Suddenly somebody shouted from the gate, 'The SS! They're heading for the brewery!' Confusion turned to chaos. Rifles and grenades, tossed aside, lay all over the place. I went over to the main building without really knowing what to do next. Men burst out of the door and started piling into a car parked by the steps. I recognized Mr Kaldoun, Mr Krocan, and Mr Jungwirth. The car started off with a jerk and honked its way through the milling crowd. I figured I'd go through the warehouse, hide in the bushes along the river bank, and wait until it all blew over. Tanks couldn't cross the bridge anyway. It wouldn't hold them. I hurried along, keeping close to the wall. The savage bursts of gunfire from town were getting closer and closer. I jumped and dodged between little piles of abandoned weapons. Amazing how many guns we'd already captured from the Germans. Then all



of a sudden I saw somebody inching out through a small low window next to the sidewalk just ahead of me. Already more than half-way out, supporting the front of his body on the flat of his hands, he was handwalking forward trying to get his legs and feet out. I stopped. A smudged figure sprawled on the sidewalk, picked itself up, and turned to face me. It had on one of those little caps like Masaryk used to wear. It was Prema. Prema! His cap was cocked over a coal-dusted face and his white eyeballs shone through the black. Prema! I felt a wild rush of joy. Just the guy I'd been looking for. Things would really start happening now.

'Prema!' I shouted.

'Danny! What's going on? Where're the Germans?'

'They're supposed to be coming this way.' I still couldn't get over how glad I was to see him again. 'How'd you get out of there anyway?'

'I've been filing away like mad for three days. Come on, let's get moving.'

'Wait! Where are we going?'

'My place. Let's move!'

'What're we gonna do there?'

'I've got a machine gun all ready to go.'

'A machine gun?'

'Yeah. Come on, let's move!' Prema pulled my arm. Machine guns rattled from the bridge.

'Wait! The Germans are out on the streets!'

Prema stopped. 'Christ! That submachine gun's the only thing you got?'

I looked around. 'There're guns lying all over the place,' I said. Prema ran out onto the driveway, grabbed a rifle, hunted around for something else like his life depended on it, stooped, and stuck whatever it was in his pocket.

'Come on!' I yelled. 'Let's go round the back way.'

'And then?'

'Under the bridge.'

We ran over to the warehouse. You could still hear shots coming from over in front of the brewery. The warehouse was dark; we ran straight through and out the back door to the

slope down to the river bank. We forced our way through the wet shrubbery at the top of the slope. Shots rang out to our left. Prema ran ahead, plunged down the slope with big long strides and I slid down after him. By the river bank, we looked up from its reflection in the water to the bridge itself, arching against the pale sky. Along the railing you could see the running silhouettes of people wearing hats and caps. Only a few carried rifles. A tank roared along a street on the other side of the bridge. We crouched there under the bushes, water dripping on us from the branches, the dark river murmuring along a few feet below. A machine gun chattered in a series of short bursts above the roar of the tank. The figures on the bridge dropped out of sight. On the opposite bank, a couple of shadows headed down towards the river and off towards the edge of town.

'Let's go,' I said to Prema.

'Wait,' he said. The roaring of the motor stopped. In the silence you could hear the crunch of hobnailed boots up on the bridge. Prema rose and pulled something out of his pocket. It was a hand grenade. He pulled the pin. Up on the bridge the black silhouettes of German soldiers stood out very sharp and clear, the noise of their boots resounding above the river. Prema stretched his arm way back, then pitched the grenade. Then he threw himself down on the ground beside me. I pushed my face in the wet earth. There was a big blast and chunks of metal came down, tearing leaves off the trees. Prema jumped up.

'Run!' he yelled. Then I was up and running too, along the river bank under the bridge. I saw that a piece of the railing had been blown out of the middle of the bridge and was bobbing in the water now and the air was dusty and full of smoke. We ran along under the bridge. Prema stumbled. Suddenly an SS man loomed up from behind the bridge pillar. He was right in front of me, wearing a camouflaged poncho. For a fraction of a second I looked at his wet helmet, the ammunition belt slung across his chest, and then I pulled back on the trigger. Flames leapt from the muzzle and I felt something jerk up sharply in my hands. The SS man leaned slightly forward and



then fell hard and we went by him without even stopping. He lay there, wet, big, strong, in full camouflage, his helmet shoved back, his eyes wide open, and his blond hair, wet from the rain and sweat, stuck to his forehead. We ran on and didn't look back. Along the bank of the river, which reflected the brilliant colours of the western sky, we hurried away from the bridge. A machine gun barked behind us but I didn't hear the bullets coming by. We scrambled up the slope to the path at the top and ran on to the first weir. There we stopped and looked back. A light cloud of smoke was still lifting from the middle of the bridge; at the town end of the bridge stood a tank. Its flaring machine gun was firing off into the woods somewhere. Nobody seemed to be running after us. Then a couple of helmeted figures jumped back on to the tank. It backed up and turned.

'Step on it! Let's move!' said Prema. We turned and loped on down along the river bank, the western sky looking more fantastic than ever. The tank growled somewhere behind us and we ran on a little farther, then left the path and got down by the river again. Behind the weir the river was hardly more than a creek. Prema jumped into the water, I went in after him, and we waded over to the other side. After we'd clambered up the slope on this side, we took off across a vacant lot towards the courthouse. There wasn't a soul in sight. Above the city, the castle glittered in the rays of the setting sun, its windows a smouldering gold. Below the castle, the lilacs glimmered like lanterns. We tramped along the foot bridge over the stream, past the place where women used to do their washing, then turned into Skocdopole's warehouse. The corrugated-metal overhead door was shut. Prema took a key out of his pocket and unlocked the door.

'What's the plan?' I asked.

'We're going to take the machine gun up to Sugarloaf Hill and wait for 'em there.'

'You think they'll head over that way?'

'We'll see.' Prema pushed up the rumbling overhead door.

We went in. It was dark inside. Prema switched on the dim bulb in the ceiling.

'Come on. Give me a hand with this thing,' he said, slapping a crate that stood in a corner. 'We'll just tip this thing off.'

We tipped the crate forward and let it down. My eyes popped. On little steel wheels stood a heavy, well-polished machine gun. The fat cooling sleeve around the barrel glistened and its funnel-shaped muzzle looked deadly.

'Where'd you ever get hold of that?' I asked in amazement.

'I had it down in the cellar. Ever since the mobilization.'

'But where'd you get it in the first place?'

'Robert got it when he was still around. Come on, let's push it out.' Robert was Prema's cousin, the one who'd left the country. We leaned against the gun and pushed it out in front of the warehouse. It was awfully heavy. There was nobody around out there.

'How're you planning to get it up to Sugarloaf?' I asked.

'We'll drive it up,' said Prema, and vanished around the corner. I stood beside the gun, looking it over. It had a steel shield with a sight slit and two hand grips for aiming. This was really something. You could stage a real uprising with a thing like this. Like in that picture I'd seen in *Signal* or somewhere of communist bandits disturbing the peace and tranquillity of Warsaw by staging a bloody uprising and up on a rooftop, his cap shifted to the back of his head and a cigarette dangling out of his mouth, behind a machine gun just like this, one guy all by himself firing away down at the street. Prema reappeared pushing Skocdopole's red motor-cycle. It had a sidecar.

'You going to put it in the sidecar?'

'Sure.'

'You think it'll make it with all that weight?'

'I know it will.' We lifted the machine gun up and into the sidecar. The gun almost pulled us in after it, it was so heavy. The sidecar sagged over to one side.

'Boy, I don't know whether we're going to make it up to Sugarloaf or not,' I said.

'Don't worry. I've tried it,' said Prema.

'Tried it? When?'



'Not with the gun, though. I weighed it and then drove up there with a load of rocks.'

The machine gun stuck way out in front and over the top of the sidecar a bit.

'Okay. Hop on,' said Prema. I got on behind him. We could hear a tank going down the main street.

'The bastard - he's going to jump to get away from us,' said Prema. Then he jumped into the saddle, tramped hard as he gripped the handlebars, let the motor bang and pop for a minute, and then off we went. We turned the corner towards the high school and then boomed up the street. As we bumped over the cobblestones, I could feel my submachine gun thumping my back. Some guys were running from the underpass. Prema slowed down and yelled, 'Some more Germans coming?'

'Yeah,' one of them shouted back as he kept right on running. 'They're out by the customs house - big fight out there with the Russians!'

'Good,' said Prema, and stepped on the gas. We took the corner onto the main street at full speed, using the machine gun as a counterweight. The street led straight out past Serpon's factory to Sugarloaf, whose crown looked blood red in the sunset. I could feel the motor chugging away between my knees as houses whizzed by on both sides of the road. Up ahead and a long way off a German tank disappeared around a bend. The cool evening wind slammed into my face and the springs in the motor-cycle seat bounced like mad. Holding on to Prema's waist, I could feel the tight-stretched muscles of his back. The gun he'd slung across his shoulder dug into my chest. And then, for the first time, it struck me that I'd really fired after all. That I'd killed somebody. We tore on down the street that was as red with the sun as if the whole block was on fire. I couldn't worry about it. That was life, that's all. We shot across the cobblestones, past Serpon's factory, past the last scattered houses, then up the highway towards the woods. Looking off to the side I could see the town below us in the valley looking very peaceful and the same as always, with lights in the windows, and, above the housetops, the honey-coloured crowns of the hills. Prema slowed down and turned

off on to a bumpy path. He stopped at the edge of the woods: we got off. There was a stretch of meadow between us and the highway now and at the bottom of the steeply-climbing highway lay the city glowing in the last minutes of the day's light.

'We'll set it up here,' said Prema. There wasn't a soul in sight. We stood there alone at the edge of the woods beside the motor-cycle and then we lifted the machine gun out and set it down on the ground. Prema went a little way into the woods.

'Good. The hollow's right over here,' he called. Then he reappeared and said, 'Let's put it here at the edge of the woods. Over by the bushes.'

We put our shoulders against the gun and shoved it towards the woods. There was a low clump of hazel bushes growing here. That's where we set it down. Behind the bushes there was a long shallow dip in the ground. Prema fixed the gun in position and ran back to the motor-cycle. He took two boxes of ammunition belts out of the sidecar and dragged them back to where I was waiting in the hollow. We sat down by the gun and Prema locked in the ammunition belt. It was already almost dark just beyond the bushes; I felt like I was off camping somewhere. From way off in back of the town you could hear gunfire.

'Watch out, now,' said Prema. 'You'll hold the belt for me. I'll shoot.'

I held the belt. Prema sat down behind the gun. Then there was a short loud burst and my ears popped.

'Good,' said Prema. The air was thick with the acrid smell of burned powder. Prema stayed where he was in position. We looked out over the highway. As the sun set, the highway darkened and the slope to the right of the road filled up with dusk. We sat above the road, silently waiting. From town you could hear the distant roar of tanks. Something inside me eased. Everything that had happened to me flooded through my brain and all at once I felt awfully tired. I began to feel as if I'd had just about enough of this. The roar of the tanks was coming closer.



'It won't be long now,' said Prema.

'Mmmm,' I said. I started to think about Irena, but she seemed awfully unimportant now. After all this, I figured, Irena wouldn't mean a thing. I'd been an idiot. After this was all over, everything would be different. If, that is, we didn't get ourselves killed right here. My brain was worn out; scraps of thoughts blew around in my head; not one of them made any sense. The roar of the tanks grew closer and suddenly far down the highway, a big black shadow appeared like some huge bug, crawling swiftly up the steep grey road.

'All right. Watch out now!' said Prema, and he leaned over the handles of the gun. I crouched over and lifted the ammunition belt and felt the long cool weight of the bullets in my fingers. The sun had just gone down; dusk took over the countryside. The tank advanced along the dark road rapidly, its motor roaring as it came. It was about half-way up the hill when a second appeared behind it. Christ! I suddenly realized, there we were, all by ourselves. Still, there wasn't much we could do about that. Beside me Prema sat like a statue, following the lead tank with his machine gun. It was pretty close now, and I could see SS men perched all over it. They were everywhere - up by the turret, along the sides, under the cannon - and they were loaded down with submachine guns and grenades. As they headed west through the darkening hills, the treads of the tank clattered over the road and its motor droned on monotonously.

'Here goes!' said Prema. I could sense him tightening up and then the machine gun barked. Flames lashed out of the barrel into the darkness and in a second we were wreathed in a light cloud of bitter-smelling smoke. The ammunition belt slipped through my fingers and I looked off at the highway and saw bodies falling head first from the tank and then all of a sudden the tank swerved and tilted. More shadowy figures jumped off the tank now, their arms flung out, from all over the body of the swerving tank that tilted even farther and tipped at last into a ditch at the side of the road. Then it went right on tumbling over and over, down the hillside into the valley. Its motor whined and then stopped as the huge shadow tumbled

and lurched down the dark slope. Below us, a few scattered figures crept along the highway. I glanced at the second tank. It had stopped and soldiers were jumping out of it on both sides of the road. It was only about half-way up the hill and was hard to see. About all I could see was its black, sharp-edged silhouette. Flashes burst from the turret and bullets whistled above our heads, cracking into the tree trunks behind us. We lay flat out on the ground. The tank fired a few more rounds, then held fire.

'Let's go,' said Prema and he sat up and grabbed the handles of the machine gun again. I picked up the ammunition belt. On the highway you could hear a motor roaring at full speed. Prema pulled the trigger and flames started lashing out of our gun. They blinded me; the tank vanished for a second in the glare. But just then there was a deafening explosion and a brilliant light burst on the highway. Heavy chunks of metal tore through the air. The tank split apart before our eyes and started to burn. Prema stopped firing. In the silence we could hear the faint rumble of a truck coming down the road.

'What the hell's going on?' said Prema. 'We couldn't have knocked out ... ?'

'I don't know,' I said. We peered into the thickening dark as the flames licked up from the tank. I could make out the black shadow of a rapidly approaching truck. Shots rang out; the truck stopped. Dark silhouettes of soldiers spilled out of it.

'Christ,' said Prema. 'Those are ...'

'Russians,' I said.

'Hurrah!' yelled Prema.

The tank's motor roared, then died. Then it started up again, then again died out. A few scattered shots cracked. We crept out of the woods and looked down. The flames lapping out of the German tank lit up a bunch of soldiers - Russians with submachine guns and Germans in camouflaged ponchos, their hands raised over their heads. A bit behind them stood a truck with a white star on the door and, in the deeper dark behind the truck, the black bulk of Russian tanks.

'They got it with an anti-tank gun,' said Prema gleefully. 'Let's go down.'



Leaving the machine gun where it was, we ran down to the burning tank. In the meadow we met our first Russian.

'Halt!' yelled a voice in German out of the darkness.

'Partisani!' Prema shouted.

'Ahhh, *partisani!*' drawled the Russian, and then suddenly we were in the middle of a whole crowd of men. The Russians in their belted blouses and funny looking submachine guns with round drums and perforated barrel sleeves were darting back and forth in the flickering light of the burning tank. They looked fearsome. The Germans stood huddled together on the highway, their hands up. They kept glancing around as if looking for a chance to escape. There wasn't any. More and more Russians kept coming across the field, their broad faces laughing and grinning. Every once in a while a shot cracked out, but the soldiers around the tank paid no heed. We stood there staring into the midst of it all. Then all of a sudden a civilian walked up to us. He was carrying a rifle and wearing a red band around his sleeve and a greasy cap on his head.

'You're from the brewery?' he asked us sharply.

'No,' said Prema. 'We've got a machine gun up there on the hill.'

'Whaaat?'

'A machine gun. We were the ones that got that first tank.'

'Just who the hell do you think you're kidding?'

'The one that was ahead of this one,' said Prema coolly, and he turned and pointed up the highway where a black space gaped between the regular white teeth of the road markers. 'That's where it went over.'

'Well, I'll be damned,' said the guy, and he went over to one of the Russians with wide epaulets full of little stars and he said something to him in Russian. The Russian looked at us suspiciously, then yelled something back into the truck. A spotlight switched on and started probing the slope below us, moving down across the grass until it stopped on something big and dark. It was our tank. It lay overturned in the flat stretch at the bottom of the slope, its treads in the air. The Russian shouted and the spotlight went off. Then he said something to the guy with the red armband, who turned to us.

'Let's have a look at your machine gun, boys.'

'Come on,' said Prema. We set out across the field, the guy with the red armband and three Russians following us up. It was pitch dark now. When we got to the woods, one of the Russians turned on his flashlight. Its cone of light picked out the muzzle of our machine gun.

'Oi!' said the Russian.

The guy with the red armband just stood there. 'How the hell did you ever get that thing up here?' he said.

'By motor-cycle. In the sidecar.'

'And where did you steal it?'

'We've had it since the mobilization. Since 1938.'

The guy started talking to the Russian again. Then he turned back to us. 'What's your name?' he said.

I was just about to tell him when suddenly it dawned on me he probably just wants to know so they can decorate us for it, and I could just see the whole thing: the town square and the brass band and all the ceremonies and Dr Bohadlo and Berty with his Leica and, in the back, the guys from our band making wisecracks. No. I didn't want that. Especially not the brass band. And it struck me that right up until then everything had been great – the night and the shooting and the tanks and the Russians – but afterwards, all that would be left would be the ceremonial speeches and articles in the local paper and Mr Machacek and his *History of the Kostelec Uprising*. No, that wasn't for me. But then it flashed through my head that Irena wouldn't hear about it, either, so that wasn't any good. Irena had to find out about it. Maybe then I'd finally get somewhere with her. And I was just about to tell them my name when it occurred to me that Irena was bound to find out anyway because as soon as they started looking for us under false names everybody would know it was us because Prema would have to tell somebody sometime and, besides, nobody's ever, since the beginning of history, been able to keep a secret in Kostelec. It'd be just that much better because we'd be spared the brass band and being decorated by the mayor and, at the same time, word would get around fast and it would give me a kind of halo. I'd be a hero – in Irena's eyes anyway – and otherwise being a hero



was something I could do without, since what did I want a medal for or an article about us in the Kostelec paper? The only reason I was eager to be a hero was so that Irena would finally go to bed with me. I knew that using a fake name now and letting the truth get known later was the cleverest way to go about it. For a minute there, though, I wondered – what if the word doesn't get around, after all? But, hell, I thought, that's just a risk you've got to take and so, after stuttering a little, I finally said, 'Syrovatko.'

'And your name?' the guy asked Prema. Prema gave me a puzzled look and then said, 'My name's ... Svoboda.'

'You're from Kostelec?'

'Yeah.'

He jotted something down in a little notebook and then patted our backs.

'Good work, boys. Report to the National Committee tomorrow. Wait a minute, let's have your addresses.'

'132 Palacky Street,' I said.

'Me, too,' said Prema.

The guy wrote it down and then the Russians crowded around us, slapping us on the back. They grinned and we grinned back.

'Well, that's that,' the guy said. 'Come on, we'll give you a lift into town.'

'I've got my motor-cycle,' said Prema.

'Good,' he said. 'Well then, see you at City Hall tomorrow, right?' And he held out his hand to Prema.

'Right,' Prema said, and shook on it. Then I shook hands with him and then with the three Russians, one after the other. We stayed up by the machine gun and watched them walk back to the highway. The German tank was still burning. The Russians were loading the German prisoners into the truck, then a few Russians climbed in after them, and the truck lights came on and it started slowly driving towards town. Part way down, it stopped again and I could see a couple of men hitching on a small long-barrelled mobile gun. Tank motors growled and three tanks, one after the other, started off. They crawled past us along the highway, heading farther west. Behind them came

a few more trucks with guns hitched on behind. The German tank was almost burned out now. The Russian tanks and trucks rolled past it like black shadows and vanished in the dark to the west under the starry sky. Gradually the drone of engines receded and everything grew quiet again. Not even a single shot broke the silence now.

'I don't get it,' said Prema after a minute. 'Why didn't you tell 'em your real name?'

'I just didn't feel like it, that's all,' I said. 'They'd cart us around from one dumb celebration to the next.'

'Right,' said Prema, and we stood there in silence again. From the west all you could hear by now was the occasional faint rumble of the departing tanks and from town nothing at all. Nothing but the usual rustle of night. It was the same kind of a night as yesterday. Betelgeuse glowed red in the sky, the air was nice and cool. We stood there at the edge of the woods, looking thoughtfully out into the dark. The revolution was over. And now, I thought to myself, life was just beginning, but suddenly realized, no, it wasn't just beginning, it had just come to an end. My young life in Kostelec. Nostalgia and regret welled up in me. I swallowed hard, tears came to my eyes. I felt like crying and then I felt ashamed of myself. Still, something made me feel terribly, terribly sorry. What it was I didn't know. It was the ninth of May nineteen hundred forty-five and this had probably been the very last battle of the whole war. A new life was starting. Whatever that meant. With blind eyes, I stared down towards the town lying in a darkness, a town that had turned all its lights out because everybody was afraid, and inside me all sorts of memories tumbled around in my head, memories of all those years I'd lived here, of Irena, of high school, of Mr Katz my German teacher, of all the good old familiar things, of evenings at the Port Arthur and the music we played, of student carnivals and girls in bathing suits at the pool, and then of Irena again, and I knew it was all over now, over and done with for ever, as far away now as yesterday's wind, as those Russian tanks on the other side of the hill, as the gunfire and grenades at the customs house, as everything else in the world, and that I could never go back to it again, no



matter how much I wanted to, and it seemed to me that nothing ahead could ever be as wonderful, that nothing could be that tremendous or glamorous again, and that all that was left were these memories framed in gold. Everything I'd lived through before had been lovely. But what I was feeling now – all this nostalgia and regret and despair – was silly and dumb. Still, let the mood pass and things would look up again. That's the way it always went. I knew that. I knew damn well that nobody's ever really happy, or happy on time, since happiness belongs to the past.

'Well, let's pack up,' Prema's voice came out of the darkness; it sounded tired and sad. We walked silently into the bushes towards the machine gun. Prema unfastened the ammunition belt and we dragged the machine gun into the meadow. The spring sky glittered gloriously overhead and suddenly I felt I had to have some kind of hope, something to live for, and from somewhere out of the night and the stars that strange girl emerged, the one I hadn't met yet and who'd be more wonderful than all the Irenas and Veras and Lucies put together and she was kind and sweet to me and I strained all my muscles and Prema and I lifted the steel gun into the sidecar and the springs twanged under it. We went back for the boxes of ammunition, then got on the motor-cycle, and Prema tramped on the starter and the cylinders of the 500 exploded into the nocturnal stillness. Prema turned on the blackout headlight and drove carefully down the path to the highway. The motor-cycle bounced over the bumps and the cone of pale light danced over the rough ground. There ahead of us we saw a dead SS man lying on his stomach, a submachine gun slung across his back. Prema stopped and got off the motor-cycle.

'Wait,' he said, and went over to the SS man. He raised him up and slipped the gun off his shoulder. The man's arms swung limply in their colour-splotched sleeves. Prema slung the submachine gun over his back, then took the SS man's pistol, too. He stuck the pistol into his own belt as he walked back towards the motor-cycle's headlight. His face, with its high cheekbones, looked thin and gangsterish. He sat in the saddle in front of me and we started out onto the highway, our head-

light cutting across the silenced cooling wreck of the German tank. Going by, you could still feel the heat and smell and the smoke and oil and burned rubber. Then we left all that behind and we went on down the hill and into town between the rows of darkened houses, our motor blasting away and echoing back, past Pozner's factory and the high school and down Miller Street to Skocdopole's warehouse. Prema turned off the motor and we got off the motor-cycle and he went over to the overhead door and it was still up just the way we'd left it. He turned on the light inside and came back.

'Well, let's put it back again,' he said.

'Under the crate?'

'Yeah.' We lifted the machine gun out and dragged it through the doorway and into the warehouse. We set it by the wall, then tipped the crate back over it. 'There. Maybe it'll come in handy again.'

I looked at him and Prema looked at me. Under his Masaryk cap with the tricolour badge, his face looked grave. I didn't say anything. So maybe this wasn't the end yet. Or peace either. I didn't say anything. Prema straightened up and swung his submachine gun around under his arm.

'Let's go,' he said.

I didn't say anything. Silently we went outside. Prema turned off the light and pulled down the overhead door. I stood there waiting.

'Give me a hand with this motor-cycle,' he said. I leaned against the sidecar and we pushed the 500 around the corner into the shed. Prema locked the shed.

'Want to go over to the brewery?' I said.

'Sure,' said Prema. We cut across the vacant lot to the foot bridge.

'Listen,' I said. 'Aren't you scared they'll lock you up again?' Prema laughed.

'What was it like down in the cellar?' I said.

'I was bored stiff,' said Prema. 'What was going on in the meantime anyway?'

'You mean since Sunday?'

'Yeah.'



'You didn't hear anything at all?'

'Not a thing. They didn't just lock me up – those clowns forgot all about me.'

'Really?'

'I swear to God. It was a good thing I had enough food with me to hold out for two days. And I shit their cellar full for 'em.'

I laughed.

'So you don't know old Cemelik's dead?'

'He is? What happened? He get shot?'

'No. He had a stroke.'

'Shit,' said Prema. 'Well, at least that takes care of him. How about the other guys?'

'I don't know what's happened to them. It was a real mess though. You never saw anything like it.'

We crossed the foot bridge and went past the Czech Brethren Church. The path was absolutely deserted.

'What was all that shooting this afternoon?' said Prema.

'Out by the customs house. Hrob got killed out there.'

'Which one?'

'The short redhead. From grade school – remember?'

'Oh, him. Hell, that's a shame.'

'And Dr Vasak's wife got killed.'

'The blonde?'

'That's the one.'

We turned towards the bridge and for a while neither of us said anything. Dark figures drifted out of the brewery and disappeared in the dark. Over the woods the stars glittered and in their pale light I saw corpses lying sprawled on the bridge. As we walked across it, we had to sidestep our way around dead German soldiers. The left railing of the bridge had been blown out near the middle by Prema's grenade and there was a big hole in the sidewalk. Down below, the river flowed on as calm as before; it was black and mirrored the stars. The lantern over the brewery gate was on. Underneath it stood a reinforced guard detail. They were in uniform and armed with submachine guns. One of the guards brought his gun up to stop us but let us in when he recognized us. There was another lantern on by the ice-

house. We walked along the path to the main building. A silent bunch of figures was sitting on the ground in front of it, huddled close together; two armed men were strolling back and forth in front of them. A broadening band of light fell on the ground from the warehouse and you could hear voices. We headed over. Kramm the butcher and Mr Panozka were standing under the light staring at a wildly gesticulating German. A small crowd had gathered around – men with rifles. We could hear them swearing. We moved up behind them.

'*Ich bin kein SS-mann, ich schwöre Ihnen, ich bin kein SS-man!*' the German was saying in a terrified voice.

Kramm the butcher just glared at him.

'Take off his clothes!' he said. Two guys grabbed hold of the German and started pulling his jacket off. The German struggled as hard as he could. One of the guys gave him a hard slap across the face. Through the V of his open shirt you could see white skin and tufts of red hair. The two guys were trying to pull the German's shirt down off his shoulders but he fought back until suddenly there was a rip and his arm was bare. Kramm leaned over to look.

'So!' he said mockingly. '*Du nicht SS, nich wahr? Und was ist das?*' He pointed at something on the German's arm. The German turned pale and he was trembling and when he tried to talk he could only stutter and all you could hear was '*Nein, nein.*'

'Take a look for yourselves at the bastard,' said Kramm. People crowded around the German. I looked too. Two tattooed S's like two lightning bolts, stood out against the white skin.

'Take him away,' said Kramm and the two guys yanked the German towards the door. They dragged him out to the silent huddle in the yard. Then one of them gave him a shove and the other kicked him and the German sprawled on the ground and then quickly got up and crawled over to the others. The two guys started back to the warehouse.

'Prisoners?' I asked the guy standing next to me.

'SS men,' he said. 'They're just waiting around for morning.' There was an odd undertone of irony in his voice.



'For morning?'

'Yeah. We're going to finish 'em off in the morning.'

My stomach clenched.

'Look,' the guy said and turned his flashlight into a corner of the room. There, on a bunch of rags, lay two bodies with their noses and ears cut off and their eyes gouged out. Their crotches were a mass of blood. I felt sick.

'Who is it?' said Prema hoarsely.

'They're brothers ... or they were,' the guy said. 'It was bastards like those over there that did that to them,' he said, jerking his head towards the SS men out in the yard. I thought I was going to vomit. 'Come on,' I said to Prema, and we left the warehouse. The Germans sat hunched over on the ground under the lantern, waiting. One of them raised his head, looked around, then let his head fall back on his drawn-up knees. Most of them were sitting like that - their knees drawn up, their arms around their legs, their heads on their knees - and they had neither helmets nor weapons.

'They're going to kill 'em tomorrow,' I said.

Prema looked at me. 'What say we get out of here?'

'Come on,' I said. We went past the SS men towards the back of the brewery yard. As we passed them, one looked up at me. Our eyes met. His eyes were grave but alert in the dark of the night. He looked down almost immediately. He leaned his head against one shoulder and his blond hair shone in the lantern light and against the light the hunched-over backs of the men, their heads bent towards the ground, stood out very clearly. They sat in silence. The only noise was the sound of their guards' boots on the cobblestones. I looked away. People appeared on the path leading over to the main building.

'We could go through the warehouse,' said Prema.

'We'll go over the fence,' I said. 'I know a good place.'

We went along the side of the main building, then back behind the woodshed to the place where Benno and Haryk and I had crawled over Sunday. It wasn't so dark this time. I shinnied up and over the fence and jumped down onto the other side and suddenly, as I came down on all fours, I felt the full load of that whole day. Now that it was all over, I was

exhausted. Prema jumped down after me. We came out onto the path.

'Let's go home,' I said.

'Mmm,' said Prema. 'I'm starved.'

We walked fast, leaving the path and going down through the dark pine woods to the river. Dead branches cracked under our feet and the wet underbrush felt cold as I pushed through. We finally made it down to the river bank and then headed towards the bridge. We stopped underneath it. You could hear people's footsteps up above; a black band of shadow lay across the river under the bridge.

'Well, good night,' said Prema. 'I'll go on down this way.'

'You going to go over to the brewery tomorrow?'

'Me?' said Prema. 'They can stuff their brewery.'

'Right. Well,' I said, 'so long then.' I went up the bank to the bridge and looked down and saw Prema hurrying along the river towards the weir. I turned and stumbled over a helmet lying on the sidewalk. Irena's window was blacked out; only a crack of light showed through. I wished I knew whether Irena was there or just her parents waiting up for her. But I was tired and Irena probably had her hands full down at the Red Cross place. As I went along the path towards the station, I tried to imagine her giving injections to the wounded and smiling that sweet smile of hers at them, but even that didn't help much. I was tired, but it wasn't only that. Irena just wasn't the centre of my world any more. I turned on to Jirasek Boulevard and hurried towards our house. The stars shone warmly above the canyon of the street. I unlocked the street door and started up the stairs. My footsteps echoed up the silent stairway; a door squeaked. Then I heard Mother's worried voice call, 'Danny?'

'Yeah, I'm coming,' I said. She stood in the open doorway and the light shone into the hall from behind her so all I could see was a dark shadow.

'Danny, Danny, my dear, thank heavens! You're all right, aren't you?' she cried. She threw her arms around me and kissed me. 'Thank God, you're home. But you're all wet,' she said. 'Where were you during all that shooting? What have



you been doing? And what's that on your back?' She touched the gun.

'It's nothing, Mother. Nothing to worry about,' I said, and I kissed her and swung off my submachine gun. 'I'm okay.'

'Get out of those wet clothes right away, dear, and I'll make you some tea.'

'Fine,' I said. I looked around. Father was standing in the hall.

'I'm glad to see you home again,' he said. 'You were out there in all that shooting?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I'll tell you all about it tomorrow but right now I'm completely worn out.'

'Well, then,' he said, 'you go right to bed.'

I took off my jacket. 'I'll just wash first,' I said.

'Wait, Danny, I'll make a fire so you can have hot water,' said Mother quickly.

'No, please. Don't bother.'

'It'll only take a minute,' she said and ran off to the bathroom. You could hear her raking the ashes out of the water-heater. I stayed there with my father in the kitchen. He sat down on the bench next to the stove.

'A costly day,' he said.

'Many people get killed?' I asked.

He smiled nervously. 'Oh, yes,' he said. 'Very. And the saddest thing is that none of these deaths were really necessary.'

'Maybe. It's hard to say,' I said.

We sat there in silence.

'You heard that Mrs Vasakova was killed?' he asked. His voice trembled.

'Yes,' I said. I knew he'd always had a soft spot for her. Everybody liked her. Why did it have to happen to her? We fell silent for a while.

'Where are the Englishmen?' I asked.

'The younger one came back this morning but they both left when the shooting began.'

'They'll be back tomorrow,' I said.

'Probably.'

Mother came into the kitchen. 'Your water'll be ready in a minute.' She went over to the table and took off the tea kettle and said, 'Where've you been all this time? We were so worried, wondering if you'd been wounded.'

'Me? No. I took good care of myself.'

'Yes. You're a sensible boy, Danny,' she said.

'Well, tell us all about it tomorrow,' said Father, and he got up and went out of the kitchen and into the bathroom and you could hear him tapping the hot-water tank.

'Another minute or two and it should be all right. Good night.'

'Good night, Father,' I said. I heard him shuffling off to the bedroom. Then Mother went into the bathroom again and called out, 'You can come in now, Danny, dear,' and I got up and took my pyjamas and when I got to the bathroom Mother was standing in the doorway.

'Good night, Mother,' I said. 'You ought to get some sleep now.' I kissed her.

'Good night, dear. Is there anything else you need?'

'No. Good night.'

'Get a good long rest,' she said, and then she closed the door behind her and I was alone in the bathroom. The light shone down from the ceiling into the white tub. I pulled off my wet pants and stepped naked into the tub. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror on the wall. I was really filthy but the way the light fell on me from above I thought I looked pretty handsome with those sharp Grecian mouldings and angles around my hips and pelvis. In fact, I liked my looks so much I went on staring at myself in the mirror and then I turned on the shower. A thin stream of warm water started pouring down on me and dripping off my body. My skin glistened in the mirror. I turned the shower off and soaped the wash cloth and started scrubbing myself all over, and as I moved the body in the mirror moved, too, and I watched its hips move when I raised my arms and its arm muscles bulged when I leaned over and I started thinking about Irena, about her body, and how we could be together. I was young. Or at least that body in the mirror was, and so was Irena, and it was a damn shame that



here was my handsome body just going to waste, doing nobody else any good. I'd love her. Or at least my body would. Since, after all, that was what love was all about – my body with those great classical Greek angles around my pelvis and Irena's smooth, wet, white skin, and nothing more, nothing, nothing... But what if Lucie and Evka Manesova and Helena and Mitzi had bodies just as nice and if it was just the same with them as with her and if that was all there was to it? It was crazy. And as soon as I thought about Irena again, I suddenly saw her in the middle of that mob down by the barricade and then the way she walked across the square from the post office as the sun set and then I wanted her again and only her. It was crazy. I rubbed myself with the towel, put on my pyjamas, turned off the bathroom light and went out. I picked up my tea, put in lots of sugar and crawled in under the quilt on the couch in the kitchen and turned off the light and, looking out the window, started to drink my tea in the dark. A few lights still shone on the hillside; everything was quiet. I looked over towards the brewery and thought of the SS men sitting there by the drive, waiting for morning. I drank my tea and it warmed me up. I thought back over the day, about the tank coming up through the underpass, about the truck and how it went over into the ditch, about Hrob with his rockets and Prema with his machine gun, and about the revolution and what would come of it, but after a while my thoughts turned back all by themselves to Irena and to Prague and then to that girl I was going to meet there. I finished my tea, set down the cup on the table beside me and lay down. The stars were still shining. I looked for Betelgeuse and, when I found it, thought about the girl. I thought about how I'd meet her and how elegant and beautiful she'd be and a café came into it and comfort and pleasure and pleasantness and dreams – and so I went on thinking about her and drowsily started saying my prayers but she kept interfering with my prayers and I spoke English to her because she was American, a girl out of some movie or other, somebody absolutely different from everybody else and then I started in again, 'Hail Mary, full of grace,' and thought about that girl and she turned into Irena and I said

something to her and she said something to me and I felt very comfy and tired and drowsing off and then I feel asleep and didn't even know how I'd done it, how I'd fallen asleep, and I slept a deep dreamless sleep.